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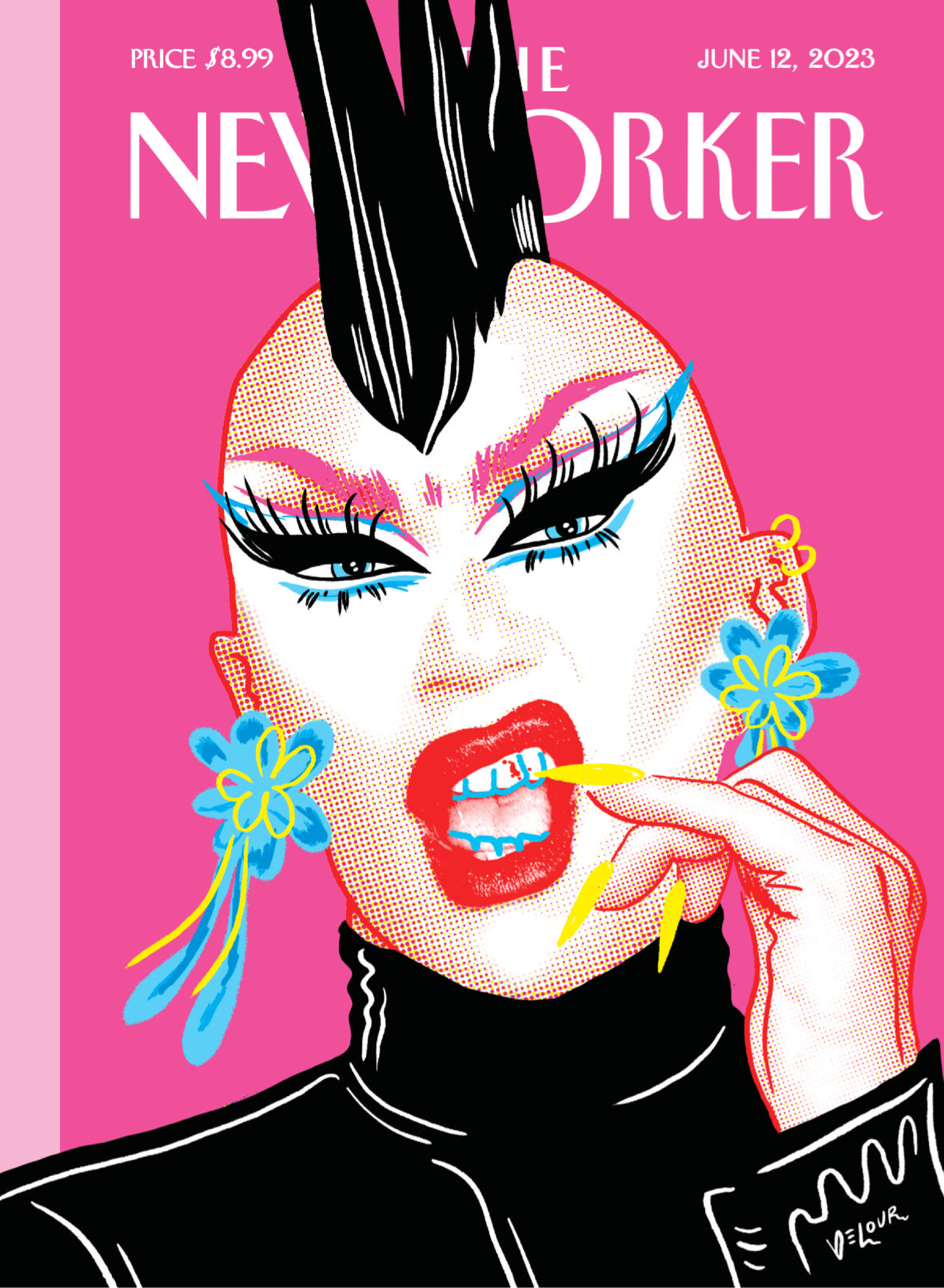
THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 12, 2023



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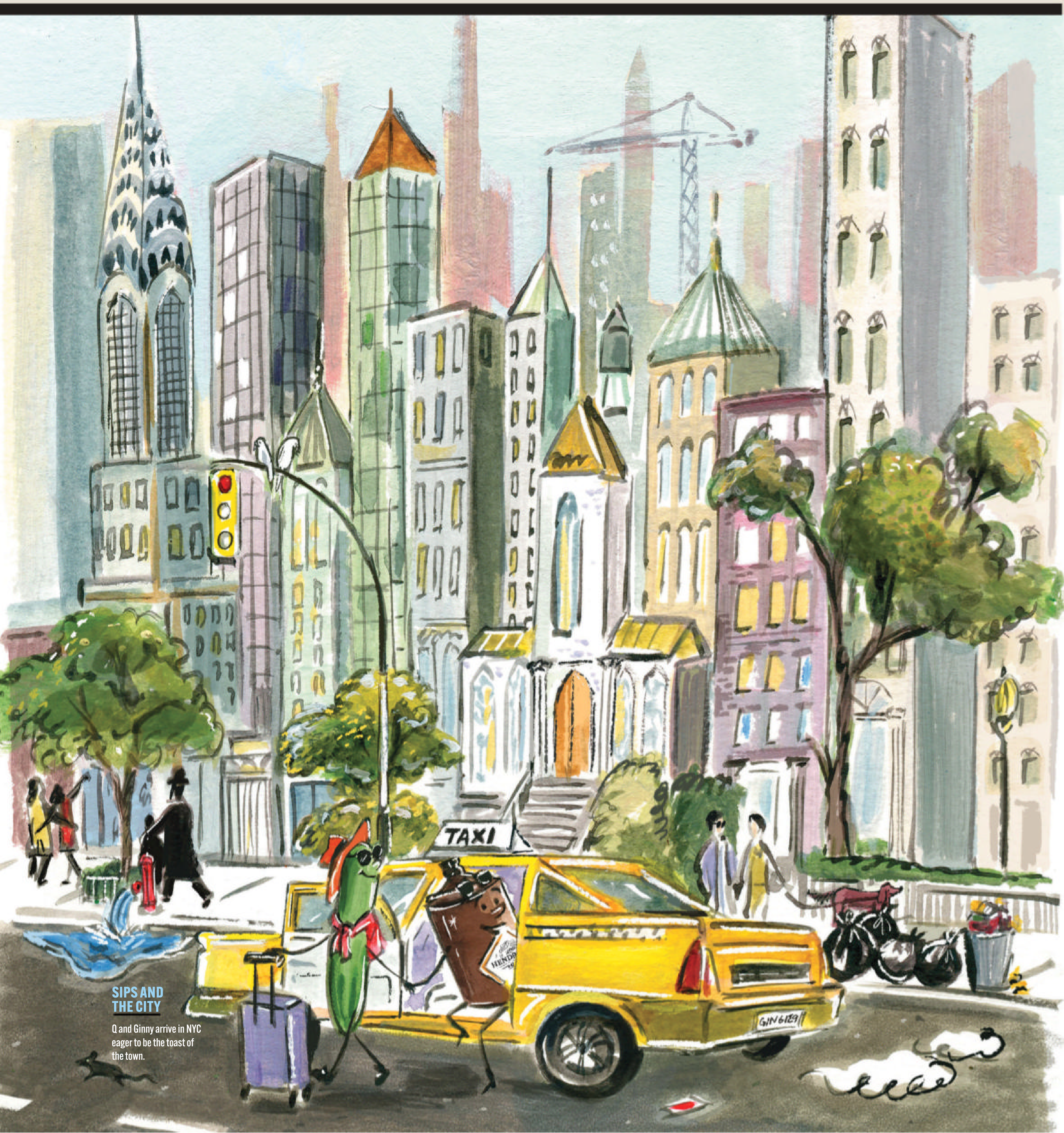
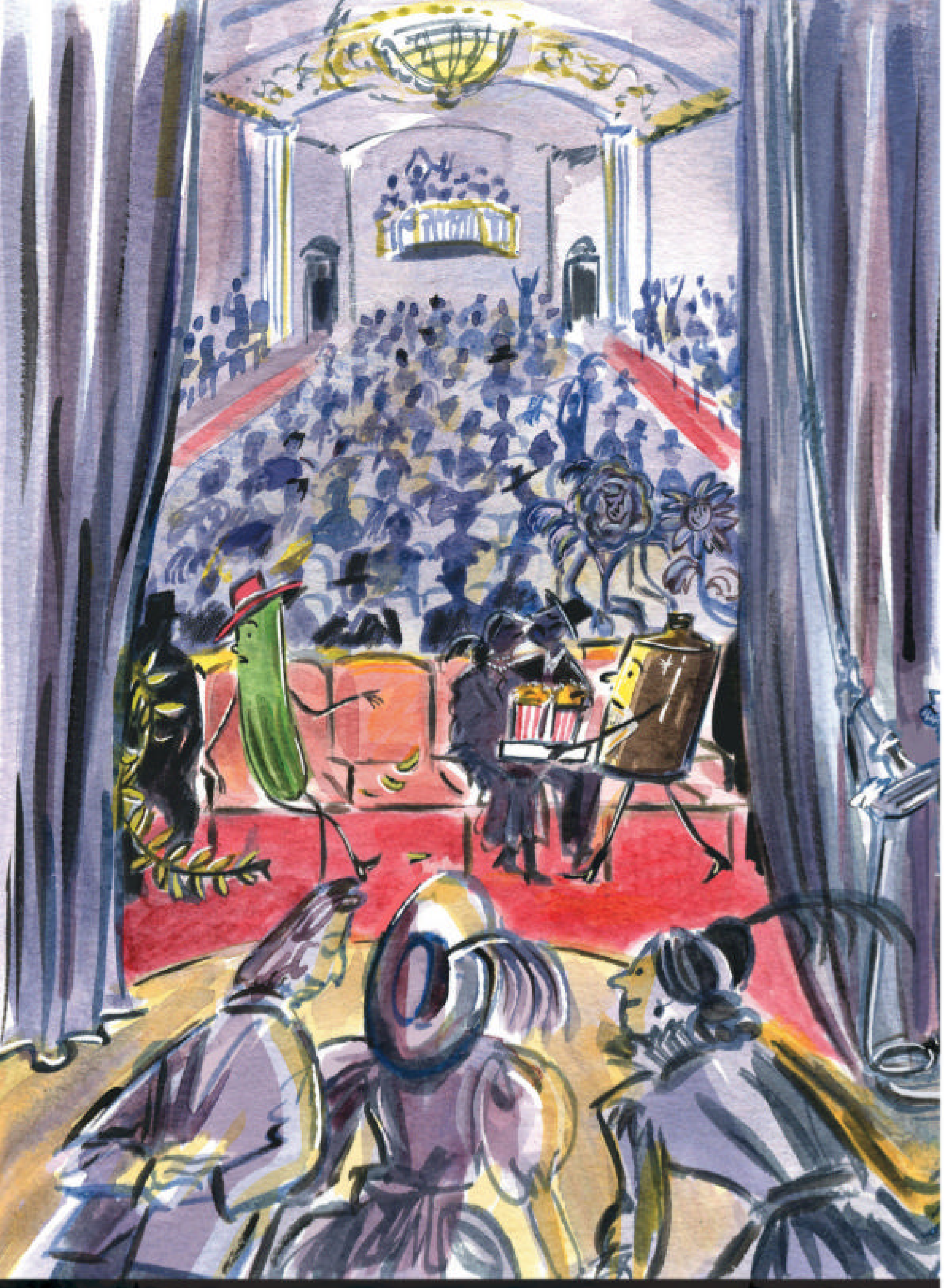
A CUCUMBER’S QUEST FOR SUMMER ROMANCE

WILL A REFRESHINGLY CURIOUS TRIP TO NEW YORK GET Q OUT OF A PICKLE?



SIPS AND THE CITY

Q and Ginny arrive in NYC eager to be the toast of the town.



THE SHOW MUST GO ON!

Ginny helps set the stage for Q to fall in love.

I am no spring gherkin, thought Q, staring into the mirror on a summer night. Will I ever find someone who stirs my soul?

“Perk up!” said Ginny, Q’s marvelous best friend with impeccable taste and a zest for adventure.

“I won’t let you tumble down a rabbit hole of self-doubt. You are still fresh, vibrant, healthy--and ready for whatever possibilities life tosses your way! Including romance.”

Hoping to reinvigorate Q’s quintessential coolness, Ginny makes a proposal.

“What if we summer in New York?”

Instantly, Q’s imagination runs wild at the thought of mixing things up, maybe even finding a pairing worth sharing.

“We could take out an ad in a New York publication for you,” declares Ginny. “A brilliantly old-school dating profile!”

Tempted by the absurdity of it all, Q contemplates what might entice a suitable companion to be more than just a one-knife stand...

First and foremost, I’m always in good spirits.

My friends describe me as smooth, down to earth, and always there to refresh their senses. In short: green flags galore!

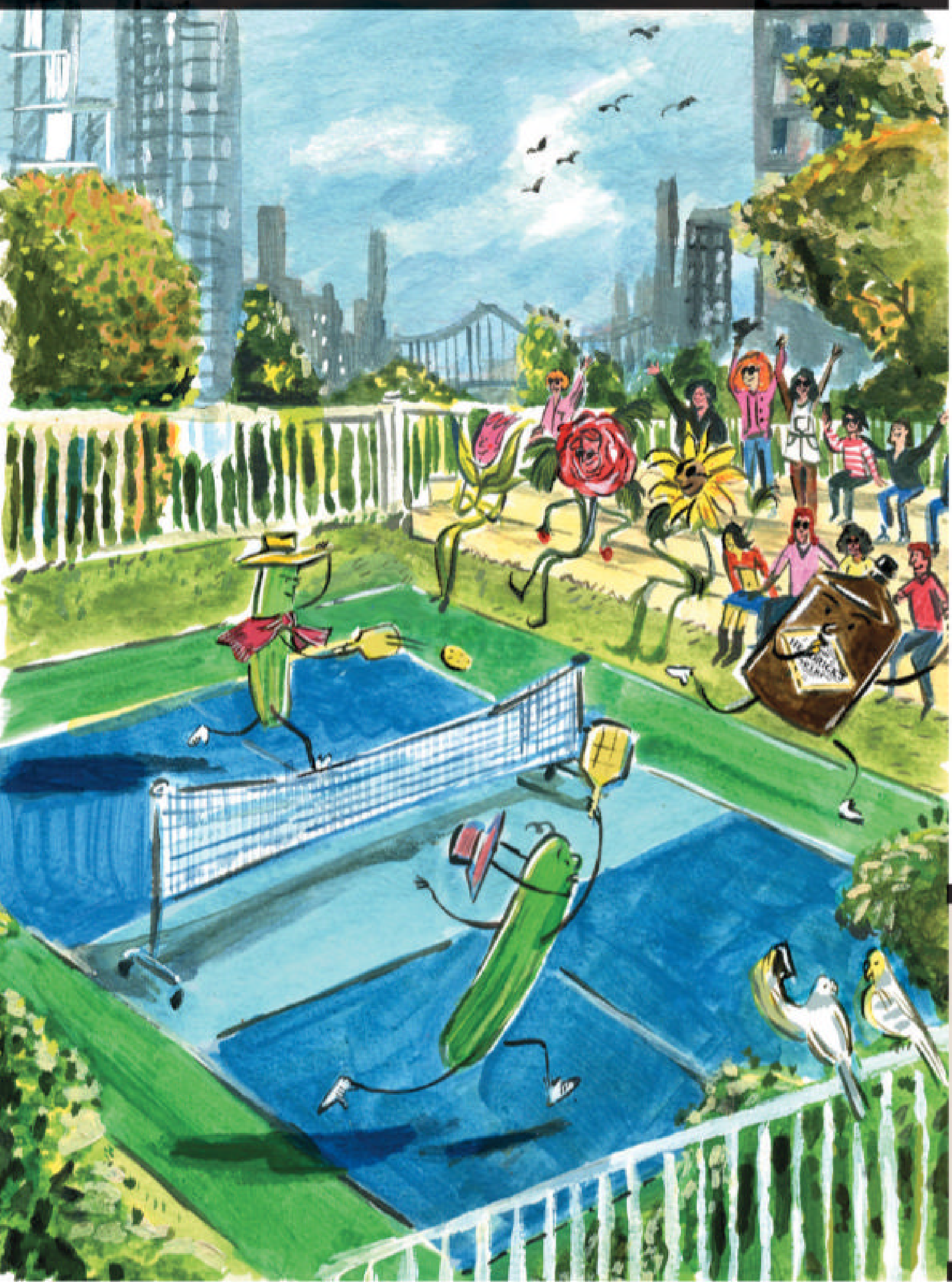
I have had my fair share of short-lived affairs with memorable sandwiches and salads, but this time around, I want a union to feel effortless, with off-the-charts natural chemistry and room to grow.

For a date, indulging in a Broadway show or strolling through the botanical gardens on a warm summer day would allow for a sublime connection to blossom. I also love a delightful game of Pickleball (which I was into before it was trendy).

I’m not just looking for a “flavor of the month,”
I’m open to putting down roots in New York with a complementary companion.

While Q shares their imaginary love-profile, Ginny has a revelation: she might already know the perfect match for Q...

Will a summer romance begin? Scan the QR code to find out how the story unfolds.



A PICKLE BALL DATE

Will Q hit it off on the court? Or leave feeling sour?

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Michael Schulman (*"Comic Effect," p. 34*) is a staff writer at the magazine. His new book, "Oscar Wars," was published in February.

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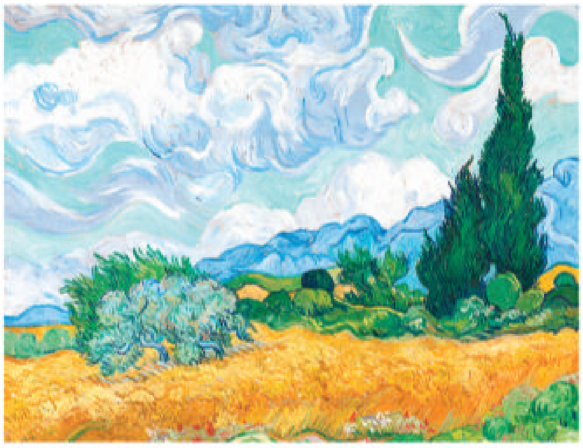
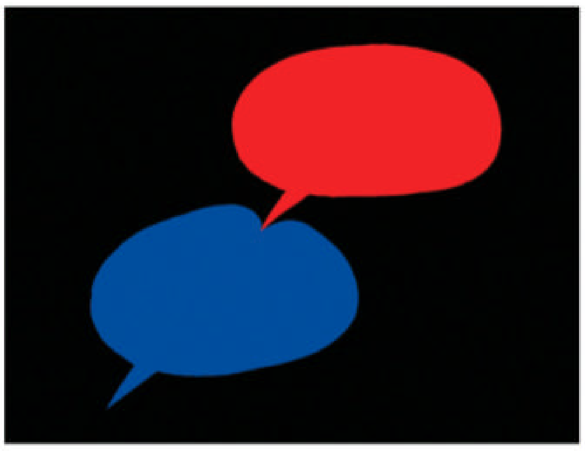
Katy Waldman (*Books, p. 76*) is a staff writer who covers books and culture.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



THE ART WORLD

Jackson Arn writes about van Gogh's gift for seeing complexity in the mundane.



ANNALS OF ACTIVISM

Emma Green on the rise and fall of a so-called politically moderate anti-woke organization.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week's magazine and all issues back to 2008.

LEFT: VAN GOGH / COURTESY THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON; RIGHT: BEN HICKEY

THE MAIL

BREAKING THE CYCLE

As someone who has experienced homelessness, I read with great interest Adam Iscoe's piece on the tragedy of Jordan Neely ("The Revolving Door," May 22nd). I was fortunate to receive the help that I needed to turn my life around; my best friend was not as fortunate. He was homeless, and took his own life when faced with forced psychiatric intervention.

I was impressed by the community organizations and social workers cited in Iscoe's article who are offering alternatives to the endless cycle of forced treatment, incarceration, and homelessness, but such alternatives are scarce. I wish the article had included a discussion of the Housing First approach, an evidence-based practice endorsed by multiple government agencies. Providing housing first and making mental-health services available on a voluntary basis significantly reduces homelessness and saves taxpayer money. Contrary to popular prejudice, most homeless people struggling with mental illness want help. It is the terrible experience with court-mandated intervention that makes people like my lost friend avoid mental-health services at all costs.

Polaris Garfield
San Diego, Calif.

ACTUAL MALICE

Jeannie Suk Gersen's piece about the Supreme Court's landmark 1964 decision New York Times Company v. Sullivan, which protects the media against defamation lawsuits, tells only part of the story (Books, May 22nd). Critics of the decision argue that Sullivan must be reworked because its principle of "actual malice" (knowingly or recklessly publishing false information) presents an impossible burden for plaintiffs. Suk Gersen links that burden with the rise in misinformation but largely disregards likelier explanations, such as the ease of Internet publishing and state-sponsored propaganda campaigns. Defamation law is not the right weapon to fight misinformation. It is triggered only by harm to individuals' reputations, not to that of the broader public; it would not, as Suk Gersen recognizes, have stemmed the tsunami of COVID-19 conspiracies. Her call to revisit the case merely risks playing into the hands of politicians who want to overturn Sullivan solely to make it easier to sue their critics and, in turn, bring public discourse to heel. Rolling back Sullivan would mean adopting an idea long ago rejected in this country: that we should give courts the power to dictate what is fair game in political debate.

Matthew Schafer
Adjunct Professor of Law
Fordham University
New York City

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

What a relief to finally hear from a fellow-bilinguist in Ian-ay Azier-fray's ode to Pig Latin (Shouts & Murmurs, May 22nd). I grew up in a nineteen-seventies, Upper West Side, Jewish milieu; Pig Latin rolled off my tongue in fluid flourishes, while the ancestral traces of Yiddish that sprinkled my home left only faint imprints. Like Frazier, I am fiercely proud of my fluency in this glorious *ongue-tay*. When I first met my husband, he asked if I spoke another language. I told him I was fluent in Pig Latin. He scoffed. Now, after twenty years of marriage, he has developed a deep respect for Pig Latin's glory. Our children, meanwhile, have been unable to grasp the language, though that, quite frankly, has great advantages.

For those who love Pig Latin, have no fear that it will die out. There may be only a few places left in the world where it is spoken, yet its beauty and efficiency will be with us *orever-fay*.

Leah Katz
Montclair, N.J.

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

Opens a little-known chapter in African American history

The First Migrants
How Black Homesteaders' Quest for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration
RICHARD EDWARDS and JACOB K. FRIEFELD
Preface by ANGELA BATES
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The First Migrants

The First Migrants heralds the story of the African American homesteaders. It is informative, comprehensive, and very personal. It shouts, "We were there."

—Catherine Meehan Blount, descendant of Black Nebraska homesteaders

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

The outdoor screening series from **Rooftop Films** has been a New York mainstay since 1997. Upcoming programs, at venues throughout the city (such as Green-Wood Cemetery, pictured above), include "In the Heights," at Hinton Park, in Queens, and a première of the post-apocalyptic drama "Biosphere," at Brooklyn Grange, in Sunset Park. A Juneteenth-weekend presentation of a documentary about the great jazz drummer Max Roach—in Herbert Von King Park, in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy—features a Q. & A. with the filmmakers and members of Roach's family.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN KANEPS

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

DANCE

Yanira Castro

Even more than most of Castro's work, "I Came Here to Weep" is interactive. It's billed as a "collective exorcism," examining the colonial possession of Puerto Rico through the deconstruction and mockery of treaties and other texts. Rather than put on a show, Castro, with an audience of participants, facilitates group activations of activity plans. The closing event is a tea ritual with Girl Scouts.—*Brian Seibert (Chocolate Factory Theatre; June 7-11.)*

Hudson River Dance Festival

At the start of every summer, Hudson River Park and the Joyce present free sunset performances on the lawn of Pier 63. This year's lineup includes the joy-giving tap dancer Ayodele Casel, the beatboxer-and-b-boy collective the Missing Element, and the Paul Taylor Dance Company, with a rosy, romantic Schubert piece by Taylor called "Mercuric Tidings."—*B.S. (Hudson River Park, Pier 63; June 8-9.)*

"Kids Dance"

Ballet Tech is a jewel; the organization has been providing free dance education since 1978, when it was created by the choreographer Eliot Feld. Its flagship is the New York City Public School for Dance, near Union Square, which offers academics and dance training for kids from fourth through eighth grade. And these kids can really dance. This year, the offerings include "A Yankee Doodle," a jocular piece set to fife-and-drum music, with choreography by Feld; "Embers of . . . ," a collaboration between two former New York City Ballet dancers, Robert La Fosse and Brian Reeder; and a piece by the kids themselves (with a little help from Ballet Tech's artistic director, Dionne D. Figgins), "Achoo, Adieu."—*Marina Harss (Joyce Theatre; June 8-11.)*

River to River Festival

The dance offerings in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's series of free, site-specific performances are both known and unknown. In "Zero Station," the astonishingly attuned duo of Molly Lieber and Eleanor Smith continue their sensitive yet raw grappling with the objectification of women, touching on pregnancy, illness, and aging. In "Lotto Royale," you won't know exactly what you're getting: audience members choose a time slot for a one-on-one performance by an artist assigned via lottery; those artists include the noted choreographers Moriah Evans, Jennifer Monson, and Mariana Valencia.—*B.S. (Various locations; June 9-18.)*

THE THEATRE

King James

Before the play starts, DJ (Khloe Janel) bathes the house with pop and R. & B. from the early two-thousands, but the work itself begins with Marvin Gaye's "Star-Spangled Banner," which preceded the 1983 N.B.A. All-Star Game. That soulful reconstruction of the problematic anthem is a proper reflection of the playwright Rajiv Joseph's take on America's obsession with success, idolatry, delusion, and disillusion. Shawn (Glenn Davis) and Matt (Chris Perfetti), two Clevelanders, forge an unlikely friendship in 2004, based on their mutual enthusiasm for LeBron James, in his rookie year with the Cavaliers. Joseph explores the racial, cultural, and economic strains on their bond through the lens of LeBron's career—as the player abandons the city, in 2010, to, as he said, take his "talents to South Beach," only to return, six years later, and lead the Cavs to a championship. Directed by Kenny Leon, for Manhattan Theatre Club, Davis (the artistic director of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, where the play premièred) and Perfetti ("Abbott Elementary") achieve a fine, funny rhythm with their basketball banter and hit the requisite dramatic notes when things get complicated.—*Ken Marks (City Center Stage 1; through June 18.)*

Primary Trust

Eboni Booth's delicate, dream-quiet play is a character study in search of a character: thirty-eight-year-old Kenneth (William Jackson Harper, astonishing on the edge of tears) certainly has traits—such as his belief in an imaginary friend (Eric Berryman) and a dependence on a local tiki bar (where every waitstaff member is played by April Matthis)—but, in order to develop, Kenneth would need to make choices, which he's too traumatized to do. Booth gives him time, though, and he eventually establishes a toehold on life, aided by kindly folk in his small town, including a warmhearted waitress (Matthis again) and his new boss (Jay O. Sanders). Booth and the director, Knud Adams, deploy various classic techniques (Kenneth recalls the stage manager in "Our Town"; the musician Luke Wygodny rings a call bell periodically, like a Buddhist mindfulness chime) to create a timeless mood. That mood remains fragile and sad. Extraordinary performances and this fogbound atmosphere are the show's chief pleasures: every detail has been tended to, from the reduced-scale Main Street set to the way that Sanders, popping up as a French waiter, blows out a match. *Puff!* He makes a miniature production around a dying light.—*Helen Shaw (Laura Pels; through July 2.)*

Sweeney Todd

In Stephen Sondheim's grim, exhilarating horror operetta, from 1979, the titular demon barber, wronged husband, and world's most horrifying sous-chef murders Victorian Londoners so that his landlady, Mrs. Lovett (Annaleigh Ashford), can pop 'em into pies. Played by the honey-voiced baritone Josh Groban, this Sweeney isn't quite the servant of "a dark and a vengeful god," as the libretto would have it; he's more a broken and regretful cipher, with a voice that pushes back the inky gloom of Thomas Kail's sometimes raggedly directed production. Kail keeps Groban seemingly miles away from the audience, up a staircase set well back on the stage, and Sweeney therefore cedes the show's primary energy to Ashford's riotously funny, capering version of Lovett—the play spins and twirls like a whirligig along with her. Any wild grandeur the evening possesses is mainly allocated to the twenty-six-person orchestra playing like mad under the stage; the eager audience, in love with Groban or Sondheim or the event itself, provides its own dynamics, screaming before Sweeney's razor ever

CONTEMPORARY DANCE

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre doesn't perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as regularly as it does at City Center and Lincoln Center, but what it brings to Brooklyn is just as reliably impressive. The company returns to BAM, June 6-11, with two programs. One is a feel-good collection: Ronald K. Brown's "Dancing Spirit," which infuses its spirituality with some funk; Twyla Tharp's "Roy's Joys," a jazz-based romp on the goofy side of carefree; and Kyle Abraham's "Are You in Your Feelings?," a pleasurable series of relationship vignettes set to R. & B. and hip-hop tracks. The other bill is all Ailey. It includes the recently revived "Survivors," from 1986, a rage-fuelled tribute to the resilience of Nelson and Winnie Mandela, along with "Night Creature," "Cry," and, of course, "Revelations."—*Brian Seibert*

ILLUSTRATION BY XIA GORDON

HOUSE

Danny Tenaglia is a d.j.'s d.j. For decades, his marathon events at Winter Music Conference, a club-business confab in Miami, drew every other headliner in the vicinity. But this New York native—who hasn't had a residency here in years—is also a fan's d.j. His sure hand on the decks and his taste for house and techno at their most darkly dramatic can make converts of nonbelievers while also drawing regulars from his glory days at Twilo (in the late nineties) and Vinyl (in the early two-thousands). Few d.j.s carry off multiple hours with his élan; a Tenaglia all-nighter feels as much sculpted as selected. At Sunset Park Rooftop, on June 10, he offers a six-hour set in an appearance for the promoters Open Air Brooklyn—although, for Tenaglia, six hours is akin to a warmup.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

catches the light.—*H.S. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/10/23.) (Lunt-Fontanne; open run.)*

The Thanksgiving Play

With Larissa FastHorse's tart comedy "The Thanksgiving Play," for Second Stage, the first known Native American woman to have a work produced on Broadway pokes Juvenalian fun at the theatre's approach to inclusion and diversity. Logan (Katie Finneran), an elementary-school drama teacher with delusions of grandeur, assembles an accidentally all-white team to devise a show to be performed for schoolchildren during Native American Heritage Month: Jaxton (Scott Foley), her lead actor and boyfriend; Caden (Chris Sullivan), a lustful middle-school historian; and Alicia (D'Arcy Carden), an actress with an Indigenous-adjacent head shot but no actual Native ancestry. ("My look is super flexible!" she chirps.) Together, the quartet discombobulates the process, derailed by their own ignorance, empty allyship vocabulary, and the awkwardness of dramatizing settler violence for kids. Much of the production's comic energy derives from the self-abnegating Logan (Finneran is a great zany), but the show, which doesn't always motivate its loudest moments, is best when it's quiet. In those lulls, we grow aware that there's a joke being played here outside the farce—and that the largely white audience, the white-led producing theatre, and the white collaborators themselves are all part of the punch line.—*H.S. (Hayes; through June 11.)*

MUSIC

The Flaming Lips

ROCK Few bands have metamorphosed with the drama and the panache that the Flaming Lips exhibited in the near-decade between the group's twin totems, "Transmissions from the Satellite Heart" (1993) and "Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots" (2002). On one side of the divide stood a psychedelic guitar quartet navigating grunge; on the other was a wizened, elegiac trio foregrounding the keyboard. The road between included a fluke hit, experiments with quadrophonic sound, the departure of the sensational guitarist Ronald Jones, and the subsequent elevation, into the band's musical factotum, of the drummer Steven Drozd. Throughout the transmutation, the Flaming Lips gazed studiously forward. Now, forty years after its formation, the group has the luxury of checking the rearview mirror, with a tour that revisits "Yoshimi" upon its anniversary. Come for the meditative grandeur of "Do You Realize??"; stay for the band's storied live act, which puts a homemade spin on the type of razzle-dazzle typically reserved for big-budget stadium stars.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Kings Theatre; June 8.)*

Stacey Kent

JAZZ Stacey Kent has a small voice—but, then, so did Billie Holiday and Peggy Lee. The art, as all three prove, lies in making the most of what you've got. The singer has found abundance in her vocal comfort zone and, by way of strict attentiveness to lyrics, transforms songs into short stories that brim with subdued passion, romance, and wonder; she's clearly given a good listen to both Holiday and Lee. As befits a comparative-literature graduate, Kent is drawn to words; she's even collaborated with the novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, who's taken on the role of occasional lyricist for her, working with Kent's husband, the saxophonist Jim Tomlinson. A New Jersey native with internationalist leanings, the British-based Kent is as comfortable with French chansons and Brazilian bossa nova as she is with respected American chestnuts. Lean into her muted declarations and Kent can bring the world to you.—*Steve Futterman (Birdland; June 7-10.)*

New York Guitar Festival

GUITARS The guitar's possibilities seem boundless in the hands of Yasmin Williams, a young finger-style player from northern Virginia. Angling her instrument so that it sits horizontally, Williams has employed tapping techniques, alternate tunings, and an attached thumb piano to reimagine the guitar. Her flowing compositions, though wordless, feel melodic, rhythmic, and lyrical. Williams is part of a vanguard of radically inventive pickers revivifying the terrain of instrumental guitar playing, incorporating modern, genre-agnostic visions. She brings her idiosyncratic approach to the second evening of New York Guitar Festival, a stylistically diverse summit, established in 1999. Produced by the curator David Spelman and the WNYC host John Schaefer, the festival also includes the jazz virtuoso Bill Frisell with the multi-instrumentalist Luke Bergman, the jazz guitarist Brandon Ross with the bassist Stomu Takeishi, the singer and songwriter Steve Gunn, and the South Korean shape-shifter Jiji.—*Jenn Pelly (Jerome L. Greene Space, WNYC; June 12-13.)*

"Secret Byrd"

CLASSICAL The Renaissance composer William Byrd was a devout Catholic whose abstention from Protestant services landed him on recusancy lists and subjected him to fines in Elizabethan England. One of his patrons, Sir John Petre, was known to hold clandestine Masses at home, and that practice undergirds the director Bill Barclay's "Secret Byrd," a staging of the composer's quietly transfixing Mass for Five Voices. In the atmospheric catacombs below Green-Wood Cemetery, the singers of Cathedra, supported by the string ensemble Abendmusik, enact an immersive ritual around a candlelit table, raising their voices, one to a part, in Byrd's solemn strains.—*Oussama Zahr (Green-Wood Cemetery; June 9-11.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY RICARDO DISEÑO

Bobby Shmurda

HIP-HOP In 2014, the Brooklyn rapper Bobby Shmurda was at the forefront of the reëmergence of N.Y.C. street rap when he and fellow-members of the GS9 collective were charged with sixty-nine counts of conspiracy. The indictment pointed to lyrics from Shmurda's songs as evidence. After taking a plea deal, he spent nearly seven years in prison, putting his major-label début—and his momentum—on hold. In the rapper's absence, the local drill music forged in his image became a national phenomenon, reënergizing the city's sound with a crop of new stars. The lone word on his career epitaph might have been "pioneer," ending a tragic story of what could have been, but Shmurda is persistent. Now free, he sounds thrilled to simply be out and able to make his riotous, bass-powered songs again, revelling in a landscape that he helped shape.—*Sheldon Pearce (Sony Hall; June 7.)*

ART

Sherrie Levine

This indefatigable member of the Pictures Generation—who was once cheekily christened the Franklin Mint of Modernism by the great critic David Rimanelli—presents "Wood," a small exhibition of works old and new (and old as new) which presses her long-standing interrogations of authorship and originality ever onward. "Fitz: 1-12," from 1994, is a suite of paintings on cherrywood panels, each of which replicates the same image of a crabby cartoon dog. The pup doesn't change from piece to piece, but the wood grain does—because nature, that authorless creator, never duplicates itself precisely. If the conceptual allure of the found object dimmed long ago, what remains sharp is Levine's eye for that which should be looked at. (It's not as straightforward a talent as it seems.) The sweet, sleek Japanese *kitsune* "Fox," the sumptuously knotty "Scholar Figure," and the stone "Head," from New Guinea, are three carvings that Levine acquired, dated 2023, and signed as her own. I still wonder who made them.—*Jennifer Krasinski (David Zwirner; through July 21.)*

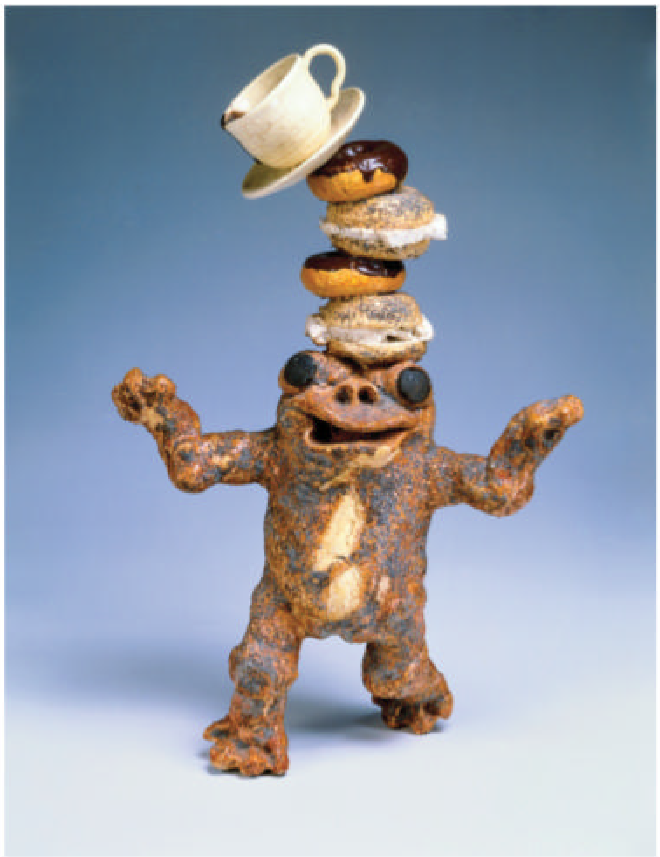
Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

Breaking the path to an American art we've long needed to see, Smith is both a force for reckoning and a force to be reckoned with. A citizen of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the eighty-three-year-old activist and artist has devoted herself to righting the story of the Native experience, foregrounding the genocide and ecological decimation that malformed the roots of our nation. Among the hundred and thirty works on view in this glorious retrospective at the Whitney is "Urban Trickster," from 2021, a cast-bronze head of a grinning coyote: both a mythical healer and a cosmically comical figure, not unlike Smith herself. Her sculptures, paintings, and works on paper deliver doses of rage and wit in equal measure. At times, Smith takes direct aim at titans of Western culture, Pablo Picasso and Walt Disney among them, as icons complicate other icons: images of buffalo, horses, and canoes face off against those of the grieving mother from "Guernica," the Lone Ranger, and Snow White. Smith's collaging of newspapers and plastic bottles may be inspired by Pop art, but, as she has noted, Indigenous people have always made sacred objects from the materials at hand. In "Fifty Shades of Brown," from 2017-18 (one of several riffs in the show on Jasper Johns's famous maps), Smith names each of the states after the color she used to paint it—Walnut, Cocoa, Buckskin, Bronze, and others—a playful yet pointed portrait of our country's true colors.—*J.K. (Whitney Museum; through Aug. 13.)*

Uman

The ecstatic new paintings by the self-schooled Uman have more colors than colors have names. Her star-making début, "I Want Everything Now," is similarly overflowing. The fifty works on canvas and paper shift in subject from mystical inner visions and illicit midnight trysts to a South African form of house music that inspired a TikTok craze. The exhibition's flowing psychic terrain echoes that of the fiercely creative artist herself, who was born in Somalia, grew up in Kenya and Denmark, made her way to New York City, around 2000, and is now settled upstate. Uman's intuitive, relentless, joyful approach has something in common with that of Yayoi Kusama, whose latest "Infinity Room" has visitors waiting for hours—meanwhile, around the corner, with no line in sight, new limitless pleasures await.—*Andrea K. Scott (Nicola Vassell; through June 17.)*

IN THE MUSEUMS



COURTESY THE ARTIST / MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

Clay proves to be terrifically funny stuff in **"Funk You Too! Humor and Irreverence in Ceramic Sculpture,"** an invigorating exhibition of fifty-odd works at the Museum of Arts and Design, through Aug. 27. With pieces including brightly colored piles of dog dung, a telephone-cum-sex toy, and a frog balancing bagels and doughnuts on its head (by David Gilhooly, pictured above), the guest curator Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy presents the largely untold legacy of this medium as deployed by mischief-makers who puncture the artificial hierarchies of high and low art, while taking on racism, sexism, and other American plagues. The show begins in the nineteen-sixties, with the makers of Funk ceramics, a loose band of West Coast outliers that included Robert Arneson (a self-reflexive goofball) and the mighty Patti Warashina, whose "Pitter-Podder" (1968) giddily discombobulates the female form. The younger generations are less bawdy but no less sly. Genesis Belanger's perverse luxury products (a gift box of facial features) seduce and repulse, while Woody De Othello's wit is darker, more complex. (Note the fate of his absent caller in 2021's "Still on Hold": no one's answering.) Also on view is a problematic portrait bust of a Black man—from Arneson's "Black Series" (1988-89)—a representation of a racial stereotype, placed on a pedestal so that it's met face to face. Here, art history isn't merely the sum of humanity's highest expressions; it is a whole story from which we must not look away.—*Jennifer Krasinski*

MOVIES

I Called Him Morgan

One of the traumas of modern music was the death of the trumpeter Lee Morgan, at the age of thirty-three, when he was shot in a Lower East Side jazz club, in 1972, by his common-law wife, Helen Morgan. Kasper Collin's 2016 documentary is centered on the sole recorded interview granted by Helen, in 1996, shortly before her death. Her story has a historical dimension, focussing on her life in New York in the nineteen-fifties, where she defied the limited opportunities for Black women and turned her midtown apartment into a freestyle cultural salon. Interviews with Lee Morgan's great musical cohorts, such as Wayne Shorter and Albert (Tootie) Heath, reveal the jazz circuit's behind-the-scenes activities, involving fast cars, sharp clothes, sexual conquests, and, often, drugs. When Lee's career was derailed by heroin addiction, Helen took care of him and checked him into rehab; when he came out clean, she managed his triumphant comeback. Then he left her for another woman, and tragedy ensued. With an insightful blend of interviews and music, archival footage and photographs, Collin anchors this resonant double portrait in its subjects' enduringly influential artistic scene and era.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

Moonlight

Miami heat and light weigh heavily on the furious lives and moods realized by the director Barry Jenkins. The grand yet finespun drama, from 2016, depicts three eras in the life of a young Black man: as a bullied schoolboy called Little (Alex Hibbert), who is neglected by his crack-addicted mother (Naomie Harris) and sheltered and mentored by a drug dealer (Mahershala Ali) and his girlfriend (Janelle Monáe); as a teen-ager with his given name of Chiron (Ashton Sanders), whose friendship with a classmate named Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) veers toward romantic intimacy and leads to violence; and as a grown man nicknamed Black (Trevante Rhodes), who faces adult responsibilities with terse determination and reconnects with Kevin (André Holland). Adapting a play by Tarell Alvin McCraney, Jenkins burrows deep into his characters' pain-seared memories, creating ferociously restrained performances and confrontational yet tender images that seem wrenched from his very core. Subtly alluding to wider societal conflicts, Jenkins looks closely at the hard passions of people whose identities are forged under relentless pressure.—*R.B. (Streaming on Tubi, Kanopy, and other services.)*

Shooting the Mafia

At the age of forty, Letizia Battaglia, who was born in 1935, became the first female photographer in the Italian daily press; this candid and fervent documentary portrait, from 2019, directed by Kim Longinotto, shows that Battaglia always lived at the turbulent crossroads of history. Born and raised in Palermo, Sicily, Battaglia escaped her domineering father by marrying at sixteen, and then escaped her oppressive husband by taking lovers, with melodramatic consequences. Finally on her own, she became a journalist before turning to photography at a time of unprecedented Mafia violence, which became her subject and her obsession—and resulted in death threats. Her coverage of the murder of judges led to a new career in politics. Cannily juxtaposing Battaglia's photographs with both news footage and clips from fictional films, and observing the photographer in conversation with the men in her life, Longinotto asserts the unity of sexual, political, and creative freedom, and bears witness to the patriarchal violence of traditional families and Mob families alike.—*R.B. (Streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

Stranger Than Fiction

The existence of Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) is of no interest, even to Harold Crick. He works for the Internal Revenue Service, never takes vacations, and always cleans his teeth with the same number of brushstrokes. His life is described to us in crisp female voice-over; little by little, we realize that Harold himself is listening to the voice, and that he is something even worse than dull. He is fictional, a character in a novel, and the narrator is in fact his creator, Karen Eiffel (Emma Thompson), who is trying to find a way to kill him off. The screenwriter, Zach Helm, and the director, Marc Forster, of this 2006 movie work through the comic implications of the setup, including the possibility that it may not turn out funny. (Harold is devastated when he reads the manuscript and understands that, in the name of art, he must indeed expire.) Dustin Hoffman plays the literature professor to whom the hero takes his problem, and Maggie Gyllenhaal is the free spirit who thaws Harold's iced-up heart. The ending may be mush, but the rest has surprising bite.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 12/4/06.) (Streaming on Pluto, Vudu, and other services.)*

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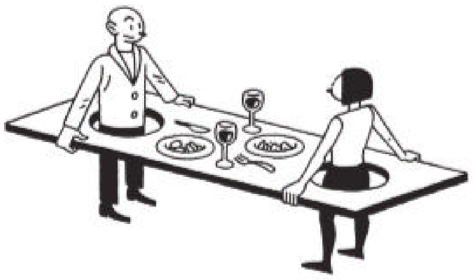
ON THE BIG SCREEN

COURTESY JANUS FILMS

To honor the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu's hundred-and-twentieth birthday and the sixtieth anniversary of his death, Film Forum presents a complete retrospective of his extant work (June 9-29), which ranges from the urbane wit of his silent films and the bitter ironies of his Second World War movies to the reserved yet exalted romanticism of his later masterworks. His career-long theme was the repression of authentic feeling by convention, tradition, and the authority of family and state—and he embodied it in striking images as well as in drama. A highlight of the series is **"The End of Summer,"** Ozu's penultimate film, from 1961, the story of a Kyoto merchant family in which two daughters—a single businesswoman and a widowed mother—must decide whether to accept arranged marriages. Meanwhile, their aged and ailing father, a widower, defies custom, propriety, and seemingly even death to pursue an affair with a former lover from wartime. Most of the movie is cinematic chamber music, set in houses, restaurants, and offices; in a spectacular, climactic outdoor sequence, Ozu suggests that nature itself is in accord with true love.—*Richard Brody*



PHOTOGRAPH BY YAEL MALKA FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

TABLES FOR TWO

Zara Forest Grill

1745 Forest Ave., Staten Island

A few Saturday mornings ago, I made a grievous logistical error. There was a half-marathon in Brooklyn, where I live, and it was pouring rain. And yet I packed my entire family into our station wagon and set out for Staten Island: I had a reservation at a new Turkish restaurant, Zara Forest Grill, and a little traffic wasn't going to stand in my way. The G.P.S. estimated forty-five minutes. An hour later, we'd barely gone a mile.

Even in the best circumstances, a trip to Staten Island from any other borough is a commitment, a decent journey by bridge or boat. For Zara Forest Grill, in Graniteville, which is closer to New Jersey than Manhattan, it's a commitment I'm willing to make. The following Monday, I went for breakfast, stayed for lunch, and left with enough takeout for dinner; who knew when I'd get back again?

Many of the dishes here are also available at the owner's first restaurant, Zara Cafe & Grill, on Hylan Boulevard. But the new place, which opened in March, is much larger, in a building vacated by a Perkins pancake house. Though the dining room has been thoughtfully renovated, with wood beams and banquettes upholstered in fabric reminiscent of a Turkish rug, it still bears the aura of a diner, with a big, broad menu that includes avocado toast and chicken piccata.

Happily, the expanded menu includes more Turkish food, too. For breakfast, there is *gozleme*, a flaky flatbread folded around potato, spinach and cheese, or ground meat, and *menemen*, a curdy scramble of eggs, tomatoes, and peppers. A breakfast platter comes with a traditional spread: fanned tomato and cucumber; salt-cured olives; assorted cheeses; tiny links of beef salami, their ends split like tulip petals; honey, cherry jam, and clotted cream; warm pita; a small, puffy, crisp-edged omelette; and a pot of strong coffee or black tea.

Lunch and dinner are best begun with the *balon* bread, a shiny blimp speckled in sesame seeds which exhales a gust of hot air when you tear off an end, to swipe through meze, such as a luscious labneh hiding crunchy walnuts in its depths, or *aci ezme*, a coarse and spicy mix of bell peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, walnuts, parsley, and chili flakes. Standouts among the entrées include the Iskender kebab, which the menu describes as the "most popular dish of Turkish cuisine": glistening shavings of perfectly seasoned lamb gyro are dressed in tomato sauce, piled atop silky yet crispy nubs of "butter-roasted bread" (a phrase I haven't been able to get out of my head), and served with tangy yogurt.

The chicken gyro, made from thighs spiced with orange peel and oregano and wrapped around the spit, is just as good; get it to go and the meat is packed on top of silky rice pilaf, soaking it in delicious fat. For the *ali nazik*, a smoky eggplant purée is whipped with labneh and heavy cream, then topped with cubes of garlicky marinated beef shish kebab and a brown-butter-and-paprika sauce. For the indecisive, there's the Zara Mix Grill, a mountain of both lamb and chicken kebab, beef shish kebab, *adana* kebab—logs of ground lamb or chicken—and ground-beef patties known as *kofte*, accompanied by pilaf, salad, and bread.

At the end of the meal, it's worth waiting the fifteen minutes it takes the kitchen to prepare the spectacular *kunefe*—a nest of twiggy shredded phyllo dough that is crisped in clarified butter, layered with cheese, and then flipped, bathed in a honey syrup, and finished with crushed pistachio. And don't miss the *kazandibi*, which translates to "bottom of the pan": neat squares of a wobbly, cornstarch-thickened milk pudding with a skin bronzed from the heat of the stove and further burnished with cinnamon—rich, creamy, and cool. *(Dishes $7-$40.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
CHILD'S WORK

You may think that child labor was abolished a century ago, at least in the United States. That was never quite true. The Fair Labor Standards Act, passed during the New Deal, outlawed "oppressive child labor" but exempted agricultural work from many of its restrictions, which, in the decades since, has left hundreds of thousands of children in the fields. In every industry, enforcement of the law has been uneven. States have always been free to strengthen protections, which some did, but challenges to the federal standards have been rare. The Reagan Administration, in its pro-business zeal, proposed lowering the standards, but abandoned the idea under fire from teachers, parents, unions, and Democratic lawmakers armed with Dickens references.

Today, however, child labor in America is on the rise. The number of minors employed in violation of child-labor laws last year was up thirty-seven per cent from the previous year, according to the Department of Labor, and up two hundred and eighty-three per cent from 2015. (These are violations caught by government, so they likely represent a fraction of the real number.) This surge is being propelled by an unhappy confluence of employers desperate to fill jobs, including dangerous jobs, at the lowest possible cost; a vast wave of "unaccompanied minors" entering the country; more than a little human trafficking; and a growing number of state legislatures that are weakening child-labor laws in deference to industry groups and, sometimes, in defiance of federal authority.

In the past two years, according to a recent report from the Economic Policy Institute, at least fourteen states have enacted or proposed laws rolling back child-labor protections. Typically, the new laws extend work hours for minors, lift restrictions on hazardous work, lower the age at which kids can bus tables where alcohol is served, or introduce new sub-minimum wages. In Iowa, a new law allows children as young as fourteen to work in industrial laundries, and, with approval from a state agency, allows sixteen-year-olds to work in roofing, excavation, demolition, the operation of power-driven machinery, and other dangerous occupations. Jennifer Sherer, a co-author of the E.P.I. report, said, "Iowa's new law contains multiple provisions that conflict with federal prohibitions on 'oppressive child labor.'" It also limits employer liability for the injury, illness, or death of a child on the job. Adolescents are almost twice as likely as adults to be injured at work.

The reasons offered to justify these initiatives often emphasize child welfare. In Ohio, where Republican legislators are also proposing weaker laws, a spokesman for the Ohio Restaurant Association testified that extending work hours for minors would cut down on their screen time. (The lawmakers offered a concurrent resolution urging Congress to lower federal child-labor standards to conform with Ohio's proposed rules.) Arkansas's Republican governor, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, recently signed a law ending a requirement that fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds obtain a parent's consent and a state permit before starting work. Linking the bill, strangely, to parental rights, the governor's office called the permit "an arbitrary burden on parents."

"It was a one-page form," Nina Mast, the other co-author of the E.P.I. report, said. "It contained basic information and informed parents of a child's rights. Removing it eliminates a paper trail, makes enforcement and monitoring much more difficult. It opens the door to exploitation." Sherer said that a lobbying template being used in state legislatures to gut child-labor laws had been provided by conservative groups such as the Foundation for Government Accountability, a think tank based in Florida.

Many employers are clearly not waiting for the laws to change. Fast-food chains, which rely on teen-age workers, seemingly treat fines for violating the laws as a cost of doing business. (It's the franchisees who actually break the laws, while the parent corporations pay lobbyists to help loosen them.) In February, the Labor Department announced that

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

it had found more than a hundred children between the ages of thirteen and seventeen working in meatpacking plants and slaughterhouses, in eight states, for Packers Sanitation Services, one of the nation's largest food-sanitation companies. The facilities themselves are owned by major corporations, including Tyson Foods and JBS. (All three companies denied that they had engaged in any wrongdoing.) The children worked overnight shifts at such jobs as cleaning bone saws and head splitters with hazardous chemicals. At least three were injured. Packers, which is owned by Blackstone, the world's largest private-equity firm, paid a civil fine of a million and a half dollars.

Social-service agencies were frustrated that the Labor Department referred none of the children from Packers to them. The *Times* reported that some had found jobs at other plants. It was clear, in any case, from a range of reports, that they were all, or nearly all, drawn from the great underage labor pool of children who have crossed the border in recent years. "Unaccompanied minors" who arrive from non-neighboring countries—which, in effect, means Central America—are permitted to remain in the U.S. and are remanded to the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services, which delivers them as quickly as possible to a sponsor while asylum applications are processed. The asylum processing typically takes years.

In 2022, a hundred and thirty thousand unaccompanied minors entered the H.H.S. system, nearly half of them from Guatemala. In the rush to house such numbers, sponsors are barely vetted. Some are relatives, some are traffickers, some are a combination. Follow-up by H.H.S. has been tenuous—the agency loses track of a huge number of children within a month of their placement. But one thing is certain: although these kids, like all children, are required to go to school—until the age of sixteen in some states, eighteen in others—and many want nothing more, they also need to work. There are debts to be repaid, living expenses, and remittances to be sent home. If employers ask for an I.D. or a Social Security number, faked documents can be easily bought; many employers do not ask.

There are signs that the Biden Administration has begun to face the child-labor crisis—the announcement of a crackdown, a request to Congress to increase penalties against employers. And yet strengthening enforcement when the budget of the regulatory state is shrinking under pressure from the debt-ceiling negotiations seems unlikely. Republicans say that the problem is an insecure border. Certainly, crumbling economies in Central America intensify this crisis. But the immediate problem is a broad indifference to the well-being of children when profits are at stake.

—*William Finnegan*

NIGHT LIFE DEPT.
EIN BERLINER

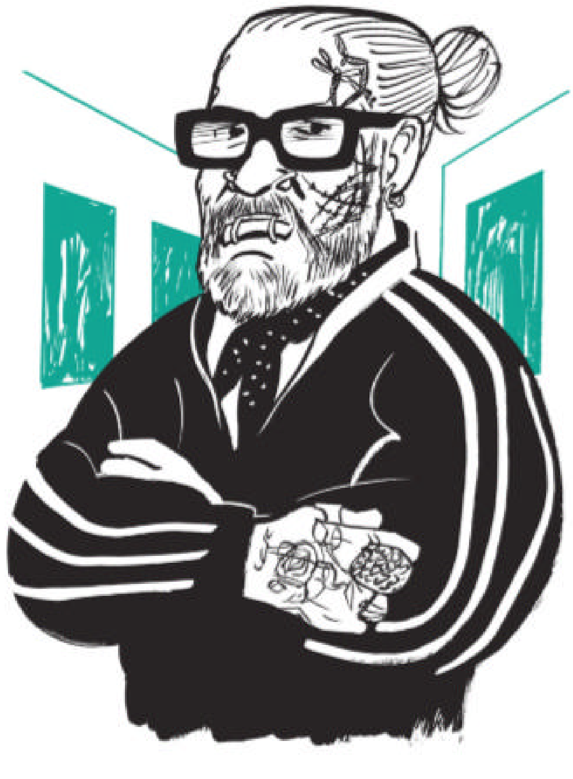
For almost two decades, Sven Marquardt has worked as the doorman and principal sorter at Berghain, the Berlin night club. He has been as responsible as anyone for its singular admixture of interesting humans, which, along with its freethinking ethos and its killer sound system, has made it world-famous and very hard to get into. Typically posted by the entrance, dressed in black, face-tattooed, with lower-lip piercings that look like silver fangs, he has become in his own way world-notorious, too—as an embodiment of Berghain's old East Berliner queer-punk spirit, and as the intimidating assessor of that spirit's traces in the aspirants who stand in line. The criteria for entry are obstinately imprecise. They aren't his alone, but for better or worse he has become their face. He has milked this a bit. He's been in a couple of documentaries ("Berlin Bouncer"), has published a memoir ("Die Nacht Ist Leben"), and has a cameo in the latest "John Wick." (His only line: "I am Klaus.")

Does he get tired of being Herr Berghain?

"A little bit," he said the other day. "I worked eighteen years for this house, and it's a big chance and good memories, but *ja*, now everyone knows this place."

At sixty-one, he is working there less frequently—"I don't know when my next shift is"—and focussing more on his long side career as a photographer. Last month, he visited New York for an exhibition of his work at ArtsDistrict Brooklyn, a cavernous space in Greenpoint. The show, of old and new work, is called "Disturbing Beauty." It was opening later that night, at a party with a d.j., where his newer images would be projected on the walls in concert with the techno music. "This way is more interesting to me than a gallery," he said.

Marquardt, fully armored in Balenciaga (shades, black flight jacket, flared yellow sweatpants, giant black sneakers), was accompanied by Anja Mosbeck, a representative of Galerie Deschler, in Berlin, and Hardy Paetke, Marquardt's assistant, fellow-doorman, and good friend. Paetke, who is built like a pro wrestler, made Marquardt seem less forbidding, as did Marquardt's gentle way of speaking. His English was decent, but now and then he gave up and spoke in German to his companions. In a long hallway they'd hung large-format prints he'd taken before the fall of the Wall, when he began shooting pictures of his acquaintances in the East Berlin underground.



Sven Marquardt

He said, "In those days I sometimes saw books, also pictures and postcards, from Robert Mapplethorpe. It was my inspiration. I thought, Whoa, what's that?"

Mosbeck said, "To receive such things from the West, it was a special thing."

"It was not legal," Marquardt said.

“Here was my first inspiration, a young boy, the same age as me. 1984. I was twenty-two.” He pointed out another early shot, of a man on a tar roof in a leather cap and jacket, stockings, and high heels. “He looks like someone now from the new generation of the club scene. He looks like a little bit today.”

“There hasn’t been any clubs then,” Paetke said. “No drugs. No coffee, no bananas. Craziest thing was alcohol. There has been in East Germany a strong regime of how to look, how to behave in public. So coloring your hair or doing anything which could go in the direction of queer would have caused serious problems.”

A couple weeks before coming to New York, Marquardt had encountered Patti Smith at Berlin’s Soho House. He didn’t say anything to her, but there had been a glance of recognition, or of affinity, between them. Now, in Brooklyn, he said, “It was a little bit for me this feeling that on the other end of the world we have soul mates maybe.”

After the Wall fell, Marquardt took a long break from photography. He said, “I lost my identity, with millions of people. We felt like immigrants in our own country. Yes, this is why I don’t take pictures.”

“All of a sudden everything is open—you have access to everything,” Mosbeck explained. “Everything you did before was difficult, and you had to fight for it.”

“For nine years I take no pictures.”

What did he do instead?

“Party,” Marquardt said. “It was a great, great time. I didn’t miss my camera. And I enjoyed our new life. But too much party, too much drugs, too much everything. Hardcore, *ja*.”

He has been shooting again for twenty-five years—portraits of a different kind of underground. Last year, he did a seven-week residency in New York. He and Paetke stayed in Harlem. He went out into the streets and took photos of New Yorkers who caught his eye. He rode the ferries. “In my long life, I find that humans are very interesting,” he said. “I take never pictures of people I don’t speak with.” He added, “The city is sometimes a little bit scary.”

Scary how? He spoke in German. Mosbeck translated: “The tempo.”

He said, “Sometimes I feel a little bit lost, and I’m happy when I have my assistant at my side.”

The party that night began at ten, which meant more like midnight. *Oontz, oontz, oontz, oontz*. The projections of Marquardt’s portraits flashed on the walls, apparently to the beat but in random sequences. The revellers seemed unsure whether to watch or to dance. In the hall, Mosbeck, the gallerist, pulled on cotton gloves and rehung one of the eighties prints, which had been knocked off the wall by the heavy thud of the kick drum. Marquardt, now in a black skirt (*Auch die Nacht ist Dunkel*), took in the scene and said, “I am happy.” Then he went with Paetke to hang out by the entrance, as though he were working his own party. “*Ja*, I am at the door,” he said. “Maybe this is the normal situation.”

—*Nick Paumgarten*

PUBLIC WORKS DEPT.

ART VIGILANTE

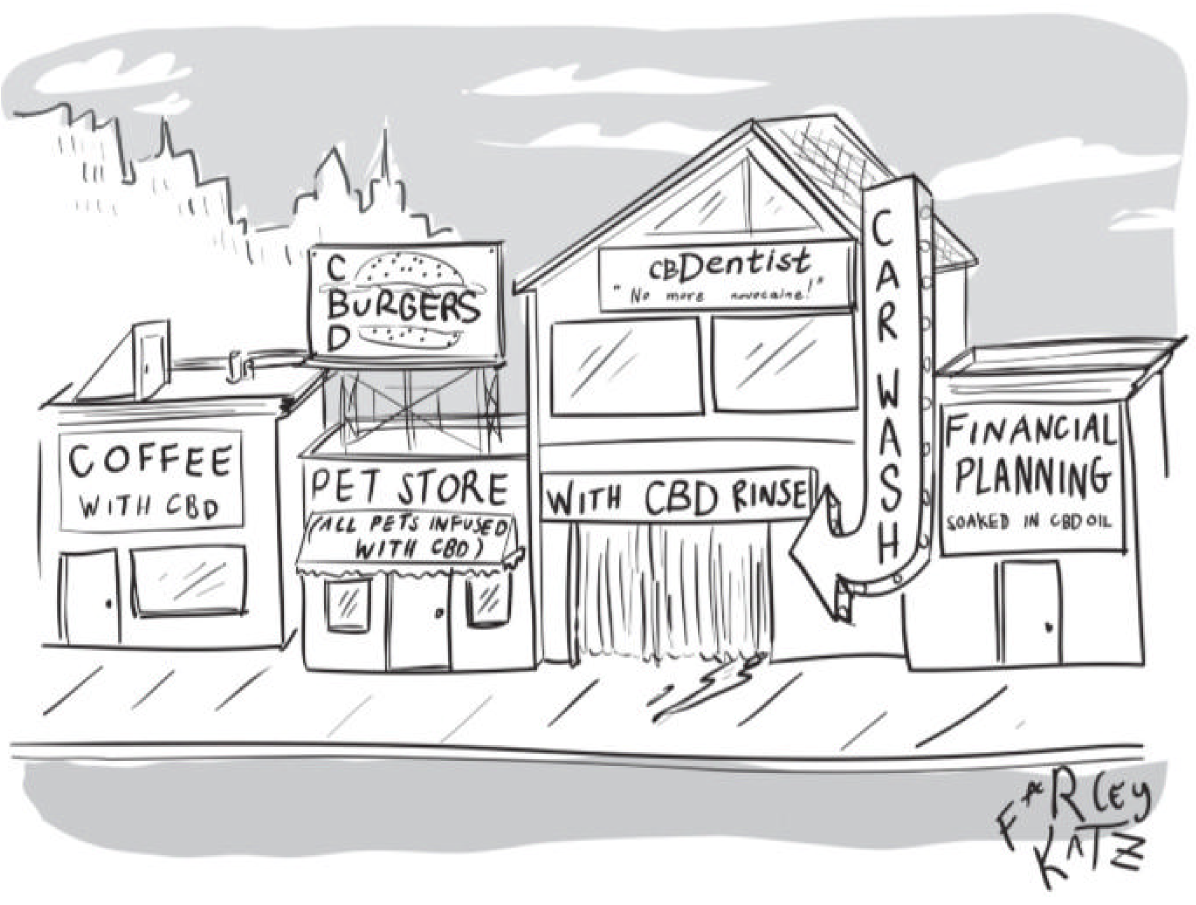
Andrew Janoff, a thirty-five-year-old e-commerce manager who lives on the Upper West Side, spent much of last year in a neighborhood dispute with Zabar’s, the venerable appetizing store on Broadway. That’s his version. When asked about Janoff, Scott Goldshine, the general manager of Zabar’s, said, “I don’t know who he is.”

It’s an art-related dustup. On West Seventy-ninth Street, on the wall of a former Designer Shoe Warehouse, a block south of Zabar’s, is a stencil by the British street artist Banksy. Known as the Zabar’s Banksy, it is likely the last remaining public Banksy in New York, created during the artist’s monthlong residency, in 2013. The other few dozen New York Banksys have been variously covered over, defaced, sealed in private collections, or auctioned off.

One evening last summer, Janoff crouched by the stencil, which shows a small boy wielding a sledgehammer, then affixed a piece of tape bearing his name to the wall. His aim? Recognition. His work? He’d been cleaning the painting.

For the past ten years, Zabar’s has taken credit for guarding the Banksy from vandalism and the N.Y.P.D.’s “graffiti squad.” Saul Zabar and his brother Stanley, the business’s two patriarchs, had it covered with a pane of plexiglass the day it was discovered. Staff put a sign above the art: “Help ZABAR’S save this Banksy.” One day last year, a new name appeared: “Help ANDREW JANOFF save this Banksy.”

“They don’t deserve to have their name on there, because they’re not cleaning it,” Janoff said, over a smoothie at a local café. For months, he said, he had



noticed a series of graffiti tags on the Banksy's plexiglass. He repeatedly wiped them away, using a rag and Goof Off. Each time, he replaced "ZABAR'S," on the sign, with "ANDREW JANOFF."

"Zabar's has abandoned it," Janoff said. "Credit should go to where credit is due. So that should be me."

Zabar's staff disagree. "We clean it," Goldshine said. "Do we clean it twenty times a year? No."

The Zabar's Banksy has come to mildly dominate Janoff's life. He has brought the issue to the attention of Willie Zabar—Stanley's grandson—whom he met at an event for an Instagram account called @oldjewishmen. Janoff, who claims to have the world's largest Jewish-bobblehead collection, was there on a date. "He told me that he would take care of it," Janoff recalled.

It was not taken care of—at least, not to Janoff's liking. And there was no second date. Janoff avoided shopping at Zabar's. "I'm not even a lox fan," he said. "So I'm not even missing out there."

Goldshine, who fields complaints, isn't worried. "If somebody tells me the rye bread has got too much salt, or the Banksy picture is being defaced, we look at everything," he said. "That's why we're still in business after ninety years."

Often, when visiting the Banksy, Janoff would find that his name had been removed. He utilized a three-step restoration process: first, a piece of blue tape, with his name on it; then a strip of white paper, also bearing his name; then clear packing tape over that.

One day, two pedestrians caught him. One carried a Zabar's bag; the other was about to snap a photo of the Banksy.

"Take that down," the photo-taker, whose name was Margo, told him. "We're not here to take a picture of Andrew Janoff—we're here to take a picture of the Zabar's."

"Why would you want Zabar's in there if they're not actually cleaning it?" Janoff asked.

"You're cleaning a piece of plastic, man," Margo said. "It's like the Empire State Building. The guys who wash the windows don't change the name to, you know, the Jakowski State Building."

Janoff moved aside, and the pair posed under the word "ZABAR'S." "Just so you know, your picture isn't truthful!" he yelled as they walked away.

Recently, a breakthrough came in the form of pastry. Janoff met another Zabar's manager, David Tait, who was more receptive. Tait assured him that they would look after the Banksy, thanked Janoff for his work, and, Janoff said, gave him a chocolate babka. (Tait denies giving the babka.) "I was glad I finally spoke to someone more official, who took me seriously and understood branding," Janoff said.

Janoff is now shopping at Zabar's again. The Banksy is clean. "It admittedly looks better without my name on it," he said. "That was only put there for justice purposes." But he still accosts passersby who take pictures of it. "I tell them that, although they are reading 'Protected by Zabar's,' it's actually me who is protecting it," he said. Then he shows them a photo of him with his cleaning supplies.

—*Naaman Zhou*

ON TOUR

GONE FISHING

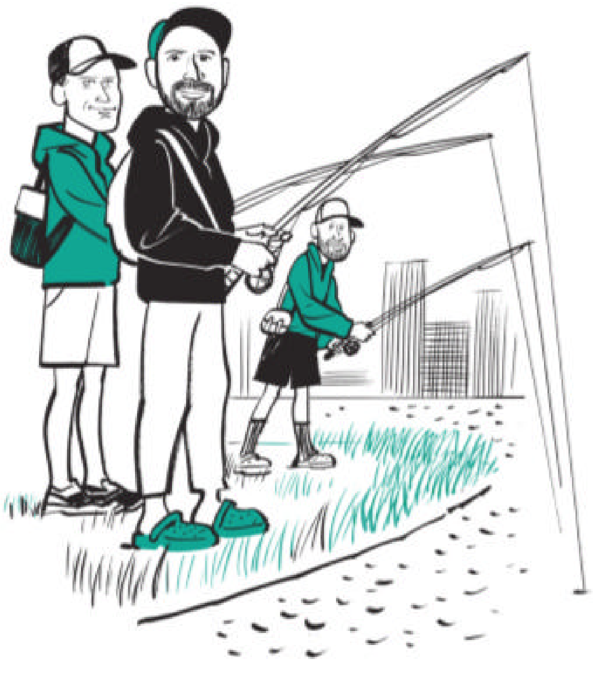
The musician S. Carey, whose first name is Sean, and who is a drummer for the band Bon Iver, goes fly-fishing whenever he has the chance. Largemouth bass in Half Moon Lake with his kids, near their home, in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Cutthroat trout while on tour in Montana. He recently started organizing his solo-tour schedule around fly-fishing: a trout trip to a secret stretch of river in the Catskills ("Some places you have to be a bit closed-lips about") was followed by a concert in Brooklyn, and then by an afternoon angling for bluegill and bass in Central Park, with two of his bandmates, Zach Hanson and Ben Lester. "I'm not, like, driven by success or fame," Carey said. "I'd rather go fishing."

Snapping turtles stretched out along the banks of the Harlem Meer, which is stocked with bass, crappie, and catfish. "Urban fishing is a whole different thing," Carey said, walking by a little boy. "You've got to be careful not to hook anyone!" Nearby, James Brown blasted from a boom box on an electric scooter, and a local fisherman, dressed in a green tracksuit, caught a six-inch largemouth bass.

Carey wore a hoodie, green Crocs, and polarized sunglasses, and carried a Patagonia tackle bag packed with flies, snacks, and a Lawrence Ferlinghetti book. "Fishing gets you out of your own head," he said. "Hours can pass, and you're, like, 'I don't know what time it is.'" He held a fly rod under his left arm as he tied a fluffy orange-and-gold homemade Woolly Bugger onto the line. "I'm terrible at knots, actually," he said, twisting the filament ten times.

"You do ten, huh? I, like, max out at six, maybe!" Lester said. He had on camo Crocs and a canvas fly vest. Carey threw out a cast, which landed near a partially submerged orange construction cone. Lester caught a six-inch bluegill. "I grew up spin-casting," Carey said. "It was my dad's favorite hobby." Fifteen years ago, in college, in Eau Claire, Lester taught Carey to fly-fish. "By the end of that summer, I was addicted," Carey said.

A few years later, Justin Vernon, Bon Iver's front man, uploaded his début album, "For Emma, Forever Ago," to MySpace. He had recorded the LP at a cabin in Wisconsin. Carey said, "I took it upon myself to learn all the songs really, really well. At his first show, at this coffee shop with eighty people, I just told him, 'Hey, man, do you want me to play drums and sing? I can do it.' And he was just blown away by it." Two hours before Bon Iver's first show, Carey became the second member of the band. The group's next album won a Grammy.



Zach Hanson, Sean Carey, and Ben Lester

In 2009, Carey started recording his own first record in the spare moments between touring and fishing trips. He released his most recent album, "Break Me Open," last year, on Earth Day. "It's about loss and change and grief," he said. In 2021, Carey's marriage fell apart; his dad died a few months later. "It was tough and dark, and the music was a huge way out," he said.

Around five o'clock, a stranger in a wide-brimmed hat and Birkenstocks shouted, "There's a big white carp in the corner over there!" He added, "This is my home water. I live across the street." He grinned. "I'm not fishing today, but this is my home water, man." A huge fish swam toward the shore. Hanson cast at it, and the carp darted away.

The stranger suggested another spot: "Go through the woods. There's, like, a crick that runs through, and you follow the crick up over to the West Side, and there's a pond on that side, too." In Central Park, the woods are called the Ravine, the crick is known as the Loch, and the pond is the Pool.

The Pool was a bust, so Carey wandered to a billion-gallon lake he'd heard about, the Reservoir. "I thought it'd be funny to walk around with all these fly vests and fishing gear," he said, "but nobody's batted an eye."

A man rode past on a double-decker custom-made bicycle. A gaggle of birders aimed expensive lenses up into a tree. Someone on a park bench smoked a blunt, and a group of friends debated superpowers.

"What's the ultimate superpower, man?"

"Super strength!"

"Flying!"

"A lot of them are unique, that's all I'm gonna say. But the best one?"

"Wings."

"Levitating!"

At the Reservoir, Carey peered over an iron fence. "I like the water clarity," he said. But there was no access. He'd caught only one fish all day.

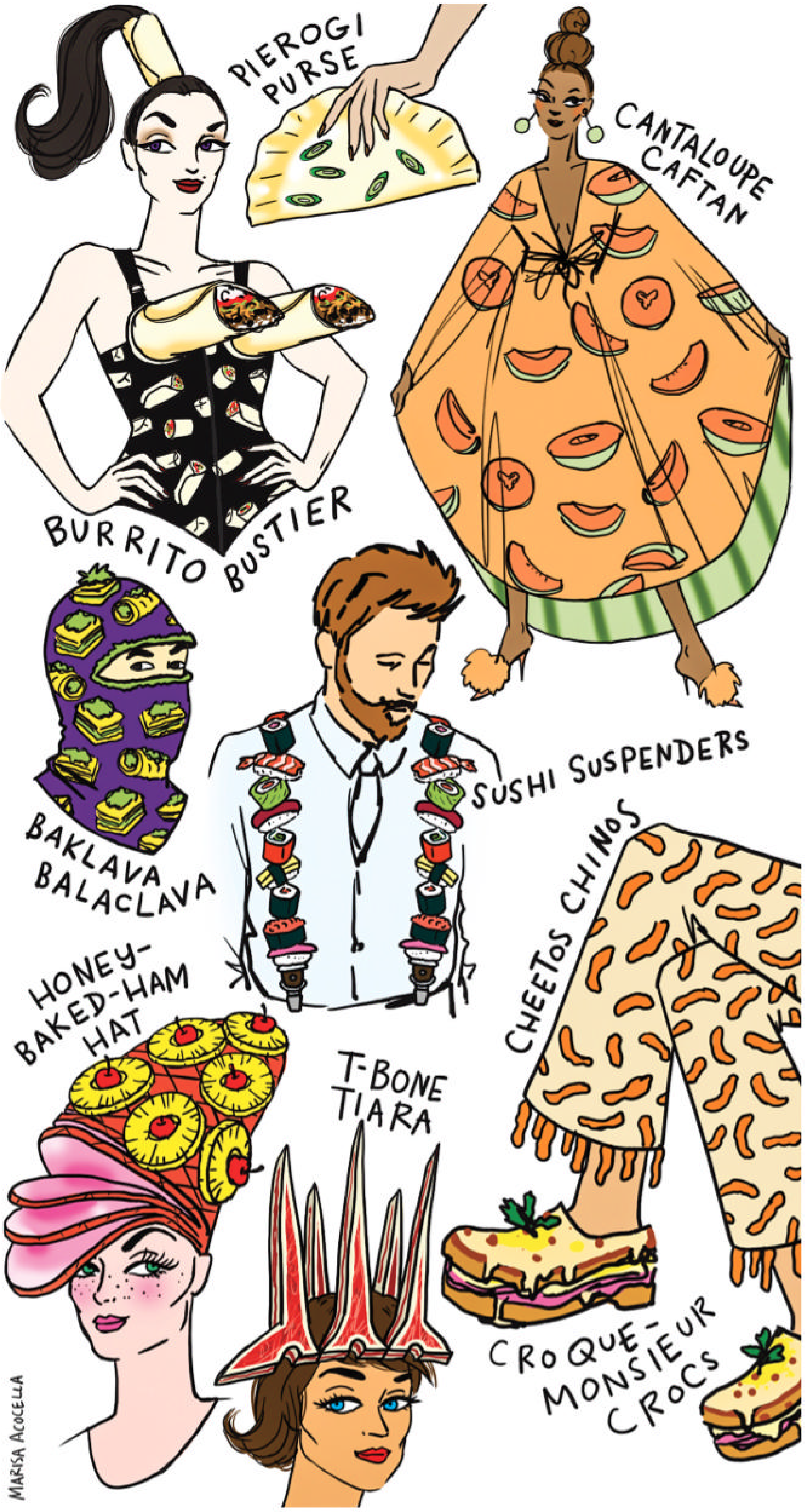
"Let's eat something!" Lester said.

They located a Mister Softee truck out on Fifth Avenue. Lester and Hanson ordered vanilla cones, and Carey got an Oreo Crunchie Crash. "I suppose if you're gonna live in a city, you know, it's a pretty good one," he said.

—*Adam Iscoe*

SKETCHPAD BY MARISA ACOCELLA
THE FOOD-ON-CLOTHES FAD

The "It" Coat . . . Is . . . a Pasta Puffer? The statement jacket designed by Rachel Antonoff and patterned with farfalle has become a social-media and street-style sensation. —The Times.

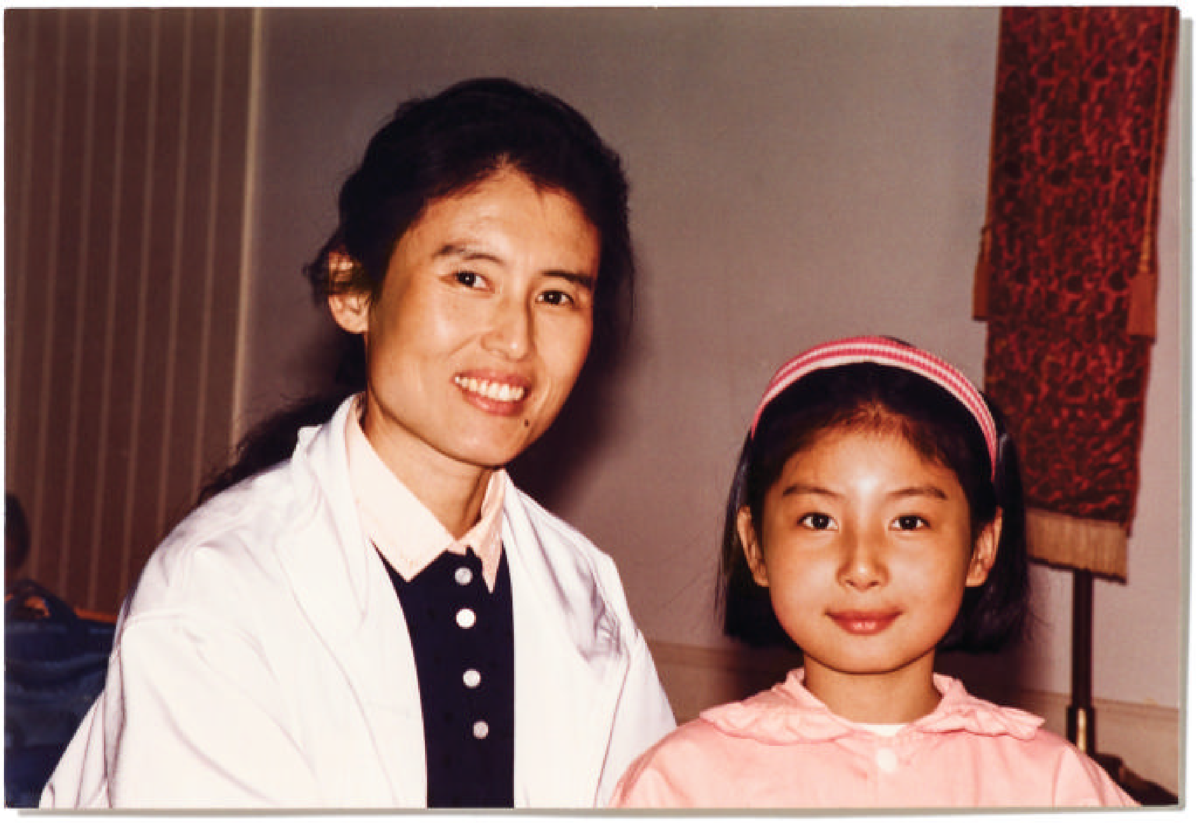


PERSONAL HISTORY

WHAT AM I WITHOUT YOU?

Two lives merged by immigration and illness.

BY JIAYANG FAN



The author and her mother, in Connecticut, circa 1992.

COURTESY THE AUTHOR

“Will I live to see its end?” your mother asks.

She is sixty-nine years old and lies in the hospital room where she has been marooned for the past eight years, shipwrecked in her own body.

“It” is the story that you are now writing—this beginning you have yet to imagine and the ending she will not live to see.

•

Write as if you were dying, Annie Dillard once said.

But what if you are writing in competition with death?

What if the story you are telling is racing against death?

•

In your dreams, you are always running. Running to catch your mother, running to intercept her before she reaches the end.

In your dreams, your mother has no legs, no arms, no spine—no body. She is smooth and pure, a sheet of glass that becomes visible only when it breaks. At which time she disintegrates into smaller and smaller pieces until you are whispering to a sliver on the tip of your finger. That fine fleck of her. What is a mother? you ask. Is this still a mother? Is that?

•

Your mother, who has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, speaks with her eyelids, using the last muscles over which she exercises twitchy control.

A.L.S. is an insurrection of the body against the mind. It is a mysterious massacre of motor neurons, the messengers that deliver data from brain to organ and limb.

It is a disease that Descartes would have loved for its brutal division of the mind, “a thinking, non-extended thing,” from the body, an “extended, non-thinking thing.”

•

To speak her mind, your mother is dependent on your body. At her bedside, you trail your finger around a clear-plastic alphabet chart, as if you were teaching her a new language. Blinking is what she has—that raw, moist thwacking.

One day, your mother wants to know what you are writing about.

You tell her that it is about you. The two of you.

“What’s interesting about us?” she asks.

You are in the middle of explaining that you are still working that out when she starts blinking again: “Summery.”

Summer?

You often have trouble communicating. Language warps and tangles between you. Chinese and English. Chinglish and misspelled English. Words that begin in English and wobble into Chinese Pinyin.

Her body, frozen, is still the most expressive thing there is. That singular determination to be understood.

Summary, you realize—she is asking for a summary. When you were ten and learning to write in English, she demanded that you write book summaries. Three-sentence précis with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Taut and efficient, free of the metaphors and florid fuss of which you were always so fond.

Before you can ask if that is what she wants now—a synopsis of your unwritten story—there is a stench. It is your mother’s shit, and already a single brown rivulet has seeped down the limp marble of her thigh.

Your mother is a marionette controlled by tubes and wires. To position her in such a way that the health aide can wipe and clean, you must align your body with hers—yours are the limbs that scaffold her limbs, the arm that clasps her arm, the knee that supports her knee.

Your mother’s face is creased in pain. Her teeth are clenched, tiny chipped doors.

The alphabet chart again.

D-E-A-D.

No, you hurry to assure her, as you have a thousand times before. No, discomfort is not death. Discomfort is only temporary.

The creases deepen.

L-I-N-E.

Deadline.

You tell your mother the month and the year that your book is due, and she asks for the exact date.

Most people don't meet their deadline, you say. You are distracted. There is too much shit. It is a wet, languid mass that has gathered in all her folds. Mud-brown and yellow and green oozing across the loaf of her flesh.

You want to rid your mother entirely of its unacceptability, but that is plainly impossible. Scrub too hard, even with a wet towel, and you will tear the rice paper of her skin. Too lightly and the bacteria left behind will fester into infection. These are the inevitabilities that come from living in a bed for eight years. You want to save your mother from these inevitabilities, just as she wants to save you from your own. But, helplessly and hopelessly, you are both beyond each other's reach.

I'll try to make the deadline, you say, as you pull the sheet from underneath her. You are wiping the folds around her pubic bone when she signals with her eyes for you to stop. She is grimacing again, in pain. A kind you would have to crawl into her body to understand.

"Not try. Never try," she spells out. "You do. Or you don't."

•

Not long after you and your mother arrived in the U.S., before your father left for good, a stranger came to the door of your dank studio apartment in New Haven to convince your mother of the existence of God. Plump, dignified, with a loose, expressive face, she was the first American, and the first Black person, you had ever seen up close. "Jehovah's Witness" meant nothing to your mother, so she took to calling the woman Missionary Lady.

That first day, Missionary Lady came bearing a free Chinese-language picture book in which a white-haired man with benevolent eyes presided serenely over Popsicle-colored sunsets. While your mother presented her with slices of watermelon, the visitor even chimed in with a few halting words of Chinese that she'd picked up in the immigrant-dense neighborhood, only one of which you understood: "Saviour."

Your mother could have used a savior then. Her marriage was on the verge of dissolution, her visa was about to expire, and she had scarcely two hundred dollars to her name and an eight-year-old daughter in tow.

In the course of several months, Missionary Lady visited weekly. Did your mother confide in her new friend the difficulties of her life? You don't know. But sometimes, as the light grew dim in the evening, you saw her thumbing through the picture book.

One of those times, when you couldn't contain yourself any longer, you asked her, "Did Missionary Lady accomplish her mission?"

"It's a good story," your mother said, sighing. "But a story can't save me."

•

Your mother didn't believe in God. But she had an iron faith, embodied in a classic fable popularized by Chairman Mao:

Once upon a time in ancient China, there lived an old man named Yu Gong. His house was nestled in a remote village and separated from the wider world by two giant mountains. Although he was already ninety years old, Yu Gong was determined to remove these obstructions, and he called on his sons to help him. His only tools were hoes and pickaxes. The mountains were massive, and the sea, where he dumped the rocks he'd chipped away, was so distant that he could make only one round trip in a year. His ambition was absurd enough that it soon invited the mockery of the local wise man. But Yu just looked at the man and sighed. "When I die, there will be my sons to continue the task, and when they die there will be their sons," he responded. The God of Heaven, who overheard Yu, was so impressed with his persistence that he dispatched two deputies to help with the impossible goal, and the mountains were forever removed from Yu's sight.

The world in which your mother grew up was predicated on the ideals of perseverance and will power. Born of messianic utopianism, its morality was one of extreme polarity. If you didn't attempt the impossible, you were indolence itself. If you were not flawless, you were evil. If you could not face the prospect of becoming a martyr, you were a coward. If you were not absolutely pure in thought and deed, you were damned. A single moment of lassitude could signal a descent into depravity. Discipline and endurance were destiny.

There was an old adage that your mother repeated for as long as you can remember, as if fingering rosary beads: "Time is like water in a sponge." You, she implied, wouldn't have the fortitude to squeeze out every drop. Would you have had the perseverance of Old Man Yu? she was in the habit of asking you, challenging you.

You couldn't imagine your mother *not* moving a mountain. The brute, burning force of her striving was its own religion.

•

In China, your mother had been a doctor. In Connecticut, she got a job as a live-in housekeeper. When that job ended, she got another. For years, you wandered like nomads, squatting in immense, remote houses, as disconnected from your idea of home as the country in which you found yourselves.

Not long after you moved into the first house, your mother's employer gave you a journal with a Degas ballerina on the cover. One of the first things you recorded in it was the cost of the journal, which you found on the back cover: $12.99, almost twice your mother's hourly wage. "Dear Diary," you wrote in an early entry, "How will I fill you up?" The blank face of the page. The empty house of you.

In the residence that physically housed you, you and your mother occupied one room and one bed. You liked to pretend that the room, wrapped in chintz and adorned with prints of mallards, was your private island in the middle of foreign territory. All around you was unrecognizable, ephemeral wilderness, your mother the sole patch of habitable terrain. Only she knew where you came from, was part of your life's seamless continuity, from the crumbling concrete tenement house where you lived during your first seven years to the studio apartment where the Missionary Lady brought you God and on to the mallards and the chintz. Without your mother, everything was smoke, the true shape of things hidden. A chipped enamelled rice cooker was all you retained of the apartment from which the two of you had been evicted months earlier. Your mother had managed to sneak it into this room and place it under the night table. You recorded this fact in your journal, because it was as if the two of you had got away with something illicit.

The two of you, feckless as runaway children.

•

When your mother was pregnant in China, she prayed for twins. It was the only permissible subversion of the state's single-child policy.

Sometimes, in the womb, one twin eats the other, you learned from a medical encyclopedia in your school library. This isn't exactly true—one twin absorbs the other, who has stopped developing in utero. The medical term for this is "a vanishing twin." You were not a twin, but the imagined carnage of cannibalism, of one baby devouring the other, stayed in your memory. Both children in the womb *try* to survive. Only one does.

•

You wandered into the plot of your life, half asleep. Like that room you shared with your mother, it didn't belong to you. One moment you were your mother's fellow-émigré and co-conspirator, and the next you were a rope pitched into the unknown, braided with strands of her implacable resolve and reckless ambition. You were the ladder upward out of her powerlessness, the towline that pulled the enterprise forward.

You had only partial access to the plan, but your mother hurtled ahead, measuring possibility against potential, maneuvering education and opportunity into position.

Your grades in school were not a measure of your aptitude in language arts or arithmetic but a testament to your ability to hold on to life itself. To grip the rock face, evade the avalanche, and swing yourself up to the next slab. Your mother lived below you, on the eroded slope, the pebbles always slipping beneath her feet, as she spelled out the situation with a desperation that struck you as humiliation: "You go to *school* in America, and I clean *toilets* in America."

•

Your mother hated nothing so much as cleaning toilets. The injustice of it. Specks of other people's shit that clung to the bowl's upper rims, which she had to reach inside with her hands to wipe off.

The toilet bowl was the crucible of indignity, this strange commode you began using only upon arrival in this country.

In the latrine in your tenement in China, everything was steeped and smeared in the natural, variegated brown of feces. But here things were different. Here the gleaming white of the porcelain was accusatory, so clearly did it mark the difference between the disgusting and the pristine, the pure and the wretched.

The first time you clogged the toilet in the bathroom connected to your room—you had not known it was possible to dam up such a civilized contraption with your own excrement—you just stood there, stupefied, as the water rose and poured over the edge. Even before your mother sheepishly borrowed the plunger from her employer, before she hissed that it was enough that she cleaned other people's shit to earn a living, she couldn't go around cleaning up yours, too, you felt dipped in an ineradicable disgrace.

•

One of the first stories about survival that you read in the American school your mother sent you to was that of a man who lost everything. You'd thought this was a story about an American god, but your teacher told you that it was also "Literature."

In the land of Uz, there lived a man named Job. God-fearing and upright, Job had seven sons and three daughters. He owned seven thousand sheep. Then, as the story goes, Satan and God decided to terrorize him. He was robbed of his home, his livestock, his children. Both mental and physical illness tormented him. His entire body was covered in painful boils that caused him to cry, "Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb?" In the end, when Job maintained his unswerving loyalty to God, everything was returned to him twofold.

In the story of Yu Gong, God rewards an old man who endeavors to do the impossible by helping him to

"I wasn't getting any work done at home, so I thought I'd try somewhere hot, bright, and uncomfortable."

accomplish in one lifetime what should have taken many. In the story of Job, God rewards an old man who maintains his faith against all odds by multiplying his worth.

•

Your mother's story was different from both Yu Gong's and Job's:

Once upon a time there lived a woman who wanted to exchange her present for her daughter's future. Little did she know that, if she did so, the two of them would merge into one ungainly creature, at once divided and reconstituted, and time would flow through both of them like water in a single stream. The child became the mother's future, and the mother became the child's present, taking up residence in her brain, blood, and bones. The woman vowed that she had no need for God, but her child always wondered, Was the bargain her mother had made a kind of prayer?

•

The first time you saw your mother steal, you were eleven and standing in the lotions aisle of CVS.

The air constricted in your lungs as you watched her clutch a jar of Olay face cream, slipping it into her purse, while pretending to examine the bottles on the next shelf over. Her fingers: they moved with animal instinct, deft and decisive, as if trapping prey.

It was your mother who had taught you that it was wrong to steal.

She didn't shoplift for the same reason that your seventh-grade classmates did. There was no thrill in it for her, of that you were certain. The things she stole were not, strictly speaking, items you or she needed in order to survive. She stole small indulgences that she did not believe she could afford, things that ever so briefly loosened the shackles of her misery.

And, knowing this, whenever you saw her steal you felt a slow, spreading dread, the recognition that there was something in you that could judge your mother, even as you actively colluded with her.

•

What you know of your mother's childhood can be summarized in a single story that is about not her childhood but her father's:

There once lived a little boy, the son of impoverished tenant farmers. One day, he was invited to the village fair by the child of his richer neighbor. The neighbor gave the boy a few coins to spend at the fair. Ecstatic, he bought himself the first toy of his life, a wooden pencil, which he hung proudly around his neck the whole day. When he returned home, his parents beat him within an inch of his life. Those coins could have bought rice and grains! Enough to feed the family for a week!

This was the only story your grandfather told your mother of his childhood, and the first time she told it to you, you recognized the echo of every hero tale you were taught as a child. A Communist cadre till the end, your grandfather had run away at age sixteen to join the Party, which had given him the first full belly he had known. Just as important, the Party had taught him how to read, inspired the avidity with which he had marked up Mao's Little Red Book: his cramped, inky annotations marching up and down the page like so many ants trooping through mountains.

The second time your mother told you the story, you were ten or eleven and she didn't have to tell it at all. The two of you were at Staples, shopping for school supplies. "BACK-TO-SCHOOL SALE," the posters all over the store screamed. Four notebooks, four mechanical pencils, your mother had stipulated, but you wanted more. You always wanted more. When you persisted, she had only to look at you and utter the words "You have more than anyone" for you to know exactly whom she was referring to.

The story was growing inside you, just as it had grown in your mother: a cactus whose spines pierced their way through your thoughts.

•

One day, your mother unexpectedly appeared in your reading life as an indigent Austrian immigrant in nineteen-tens New York. The novel was called "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," and although you could have found neither Austria nor Brooklyn on a map, the narrative moved through you until you seemed to be living inside it, instead of the other way round.

You read the novel once, twice, three times, swallowed up by the dyad of the plain, timorous, bookish daughter and her fierce and unsentimental working-class mother. The idea that mutual devotion could generate seething resentment and sorrow—it made your heart hammer. The episode that left the deepest impression on you involved a ritual in which the mother allows her daughter to have a cup of coffee with every meal, even knowing that she won't drink it, will just pour it out. "I think it's good that people like us can waste something once in a while and get the feeling of how it would be to have lots of money and not have to worry about scrounging," the mother remarks.

Scrounging. Until you read that sentence, you had not realized that that was what you and your mother did. It had never occurred to you that there could be another way for the two of you to live.

Now it seemed that you could be lacking in means yet be in possession of possibilities—this you who was one with your mother but not your mother, who squatted in other people's houses, who hungered for everything but contributed nothing.

But what did you mean to accomplish by telling your mother that story? Your mother, for whom every story was a tool, for whom *that* story could only be a knife.

How slowly she turned to face you as she said these words: "I know what you are doing. If that's the mother you want, go out and find her."

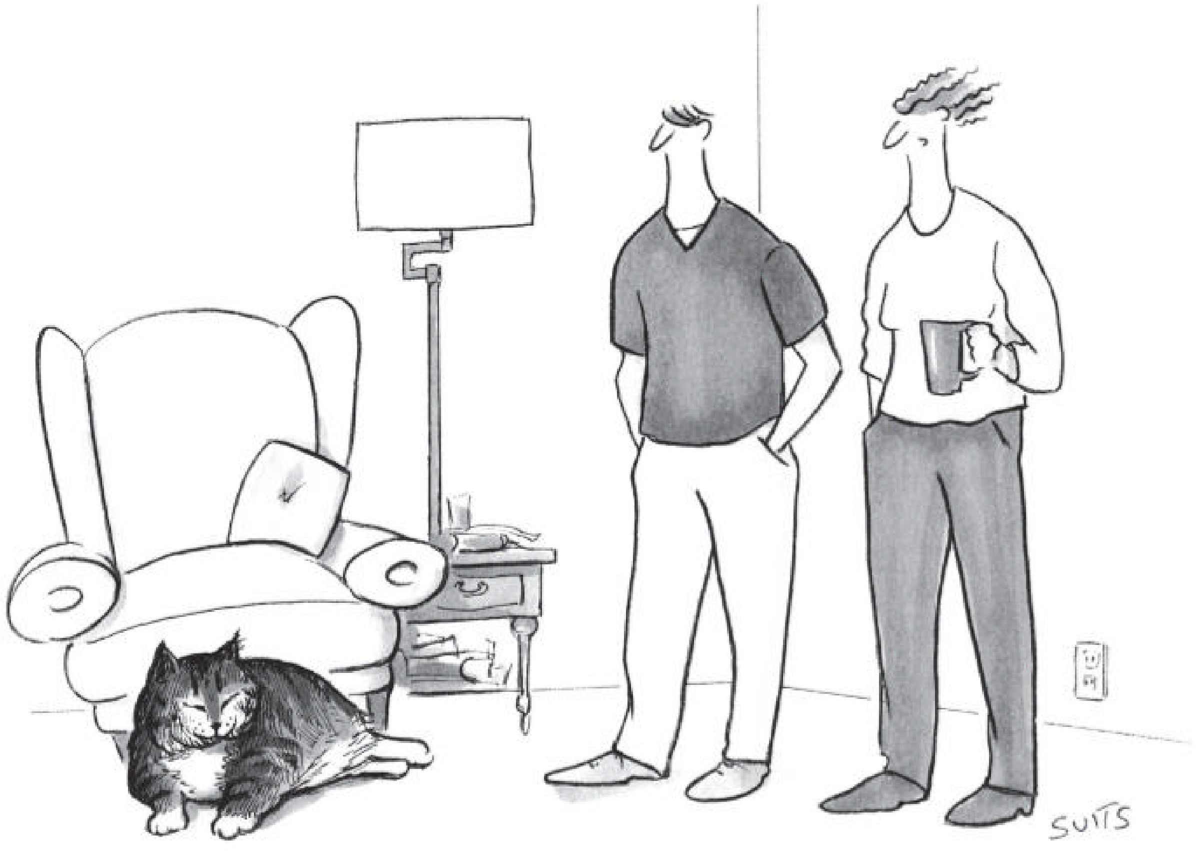
•

You were alone and she was alone. But it was the way the loneliness lived separately in each of you that pushed you both to the brink of disintegration.

Every time she left the house without you to run an errand or to pick up the children who were her charge, you were newly convinced that she would not return. Half of you had departed.

The other half was stranded in that airless prison, with nothing but your journal, your notebooks, and your mechanical pencils.

One day, she let slip something she



"Odd, since neither of us ever overfeeds her by even the smallest amount."

• •

could only have read in that journal.

When you confronted her about it, she was coolly impenitent.

"Oh, you must have known," she said briskly.

"Known what?"

"I wouldn't have read it if I didn't have to."

You didn't know how to respond except to stare at her in amazement.

"Yes," she doubled down, eyes ablaze. "I wouldn't have to if you didn't keep so many secrets."

Secrets? The only things you had ever kept from your mother were thoughts that you knew were unacceptable: sources of your own permanent self-disgust and shame. Her reading your journal was akin to her examining your soiled underwear.

"You are behaving like a child," you muttered.

"What did you say?"

You caught a glint in her eye, a primordial helplessness. She had no choice but to unleash upon you, smash her rage into you like countless shards of glass.

Long after you had moved out of that room with the mallards and the rice cooker, the room that fused two into one, you understood that she was not so much beating you into submission as pulling you back into her body. It was an act not of aggression but of desperate self-defense.

•

How old were you the day the two of you found yourselves in that art museum? Old enough that you were interested in things that tested the boundaries of your understanding, old enough to pause for a long while in front of a sculpture—a circle cast in metal, like an oversized clock, inside of which were two simplified figures in profile. One walking from the top, feet mid-stride at twelve o'clock, the other, with the same rolling gait, stepping past six o'clock.

"What are we looking at?" your mother asked, by which she meant, What are *you* looking at?

You were in the habit of puzzling out the right answer, but this time you spoke instinctively.

"Life is not a line but a circle," you said. You spoke confidently precisely because it was not a great insight. You knew it to be true the way you knew the sky to be blue. "No matter where you are, you can only walk into yourself."

You had received a scholarship to a fancy boarding school. She had moved from housekeeping to waitressing. Your world had expanded while hers remained suspended.

"A circle?" she said, and then said it again, questing and songlike. "Life is a circle."

There was a silence during which she tilted her chin and appraised you as if you were one of the figures in the sculpture. "That's nice," she said softly, with something akin to wonder.

•

You spent your early twenties waiting for your real life to begin, peering at it, as if through a window. How to break that windowpane? You didn't know. You were living in New York now, and you had a menial job at the Y.M.C.A. on the Bowery, where you were tasked with putting up multilingual signage. Most days, you had enough downtime to read books purporting to teach you how to write books.

The Y.M.C.A. was next to a Whole Foods, and every day after work you filled up a container with overpriced lettuce, beets, and boiled eggs and slipped upstairs to eat it in the café without paying. One day you were caught and led to a dark, dirty room where a Polaroid of you was snapped and you were told that, if you were ever caught stealing again, the police would be called.

The security guard who caught you, a boy who looked younger than you, couldn't hide his pleasure when he dumped the untouched food in the trash. Did you steal that, too, he said, smirking, and nodded at the book in your hand.

It was a copy of "The Writing Life," the first book of Annie Dillard's you'd read. You had just got to the passage where Dillard refers to a succession of words as "a miner's pick." If you wield it to dig a path, she says, soon you will find yourself "deep in new territory."

For you, the path always led back to your mother. How many times did you start a story about a mother and a daughter, only to find that you could not grope your way to an ending? How many times on a Friday after work, as you rode the train from the city to Connecticut, where your mother still lived, did you feel the forward motion as a journey backward through time?

In her presence, you were always divided against yourself.

There was the you who was walking away from her and the you who was perpetually diving back in.

•

Motor neurons, among our longest cells, pave a path of electric signals from brain to body. As A.L.S. progresses, cognitive function usually remains intact, but the motor neurons cease to deliver those signals. Without directives from above, limbs and organs gradually shut down until, at last, the body no longer knows how to inhale air.

You were twenty-five when your mother's illness was diagnosed, and never had the battle plan been more clear. You moved her into your apartment, one you had selected for the two of you, with a room for her and one for you. You fed her bottles of Ensure by the spoonful—until it had to be pushed through a feeding tube directly into her stomach. You set an alarm clock to wake you whenever you needed to adjust her breathing machine. You took on additional freelance work and began borrowing money from friends; you opted out of medical insurance for yourself until you could afford a part-time home aide, who was subsequently replaced by a full-time one. And then two.

•

The day that the motor neurons in your mother's body could no longer travel the length of her diaphragm, you received a call from the home aide, telling you that your mother was unconscious and that her skin was turning a translucent shade of blue.

At the hospital, when it became clear that your unconscious mother would die without mechanical ventilation, you were asked to make the choice on her behalf.

Will you save your mother or let her die?

It wasn't a choice.

Neither of you lived in the realm of choices. This was what you could not find the language to convey when her eyes flapped open, when her mouth dropped and no sound came out. A maimed bird. You had done that. You had done it not by choice but by pure instinct.

There was your mother, locked inside her body. There was her face, the color of cement after rain. There were her eyes: dark, plaintive, screaming.

That was the first terrible day of the alphabet chart, which you had encouraged her to learn while she still had the faculty of speech. Which she had dismissed, along with the use of a wheelchair. Your mother's belief in the future was always as selective as her memory of the past.

•

At 2 A.M., a heavy-footed, uniformed woman came in to change your mother.

"Family members aren't allowed," she said.

You posed this as a possibility to your mother and watched her eyes quake.

"We'll be done in a jiff."

A jiff—the words knocked around in your head. "In a jiff," you repeated to your mother. In a jiff, you were pushed out of the room, stumbling down the waxen-floored corridor and wheedling with the charge nurse for permission to be an exception to the rule.

"Really," the woman said, "we are very experienced here." She regarded you for a second—the clench of your face, the madness of your eyes. "You can't care for the patient if you don't take care of yourself first."

You walked back to your mother's room and pulled open the curtain. The aide was gone. The sheets had been changed. A strong antiseptic smell hung heavy in the air. Your mother's face was twisted and swollen, streaked with secretions gray and green.

You asked if she was O.K., but you didn't want to know the answer. Or, rather, you already knew it.

"How could you?" your mother replied, through the alphabet chart. "You left me like an animal."

•

Your mother never liked animals much and barely tolerated the pets of her employers. In the first family, there were two dogs, Max and Willy, a blond and a chocolate Lab, but your mother never called them by their names. To her, they were the Smart One and the Dumb One.

Once, when the six-year-old child she was tasked with caring for asked what her favorite animal was, she answered "panda" without even a pause. You were older, and it had never occurred to you to ask your mother such a question. "Have you ever seen one?" the child continued. "In real life?"

"No," she responded. "Of course not."

•

A whiskered doctor with a sagging belly delivers the news that your mother has pneumonia in both lungs and is at grave risk if she doesn't get a tracheostomy.

Frowning, he speculates that she may not survive the pneumonia, in any case. "Look at her," he instructs you, his voice raised to be heard above the machines that hum out her life. "Her body is *wasted*." That word: "wasted." It is a word you want to eviscerate. A word as savage as "jiff."

"So what do we do?" you ask.

"We wait."

She has been placed on two kinds of antibiotics. You ask how long they will take to work.

"*If* they work," he corrects you.

•

Once upon a time there lived a woman who wanted to collapse time and space. The plan was to exchange her present for her ailing mother's future. Little did she know that, if she did so, the two of them would merge into one ungainly creature, at once divided and reconstituted, and time would flow through both of them like water in a single stream.

But the stream. How strangely that stream would flow, not forward but in a loop, as the mother became the child's purpose.

One creature, disassembled into two bodies.

•

Pneumonia, bladder infections, kidney stones: predators that attack your mother's body with such frequency and ferocity that she is permanently entombed in the womb of her hospital room. The room around which you and a rotation of private aides orbit like crazed, frenetic birds.

You are thirty and have just begun writing for a living. Your mother's English is not good enough for her to read your magazine articles, but she is interested only in the efficiency of a summary, anyway. Always her first question: Do other people like it? By which she means the people on whom your survival depends.

When you began writing about her, it did not feel voluntary.

But how it must have struck her: treachery, theft, shame manipulated and exploited.

•

The last time you see your mother alive, you lie. You tell her that you need to leave so that you can check on her belongings at the care facility, but, really, you are hoarding time to work on a story, time that will vanish once the next day begins. She nods. You don't make eye contact. You can never bear to look her in the eye when you are lying.

The last time you see your mother alive, you lie.

You lied, and she died.

•

Sunlight is a knife in the morning. There is a predatory quality to its intensity. Opening your eyes, you half expect to disappear. To be absorbed into the ether. When, instead, the world appears, you cannot trust it. You have never seen the world without your mother in it. So how can you be sure that you are seeing it or that this is, in fact, the same "it"?

•

Tell the story well enough, because you got to go to school while she scrubbed toilets.

Tell the story well enough so that time and space will collapse and the two of you will course in a single stream, like water. Tell the story well enough to abolish the end.

Tell the story well enough.

Tell the story well enough.

Tell the story well enough.

Tell the story well enough so that both babies will survive.

•

In your new apartment, you live among your mother's journals, her shoes, her clock, that strange hanging circle, long ago stopped. Sometimes you wonder if you made her up. Her voice in your head: an incessant pull of you to yourself, your most enduring tether.

Tell me a story, the mother inside you says.

What kind of story? you respond.

Something you read that's interesting but not too complicated. A story that I can understand.

What comes to mind is the story of the octopus.

The kind I used to cook for you? she asks.

Yes, you say. Like the kind you used to soft-boil for me and marinate with vinegar and sesame oil.

But you know animals don't interest me.

And why is that?

Because I am not a small child.

Right. I am the child, and I want to tell my mother a story about a mother. A mother who also happens to be an octopus.

She rolls her eyes. Oh, how she rolls her eyes.

Once upon a time there lived a mother octopus. For a long time, she roamed alone on the ocean floor, and then one day she became pregnant.

How did she become pregnant?

Not important to the story. What's important is that she lays eggs only once in her life.

I hope she lays quality eggs, my mother says, grinning.

Well, there are a lot of them, tiny white beads that float free until she gathers them into clusters with her long arms and twists them into braids, which she hangs from the roof of an underwater cave. She is a very resourceful octopus, you see.

It sounds tedious, your mother says. Not unlike this story.

In the sea, there is no time for exhaustion, you continue, faster, trying to breathe it all out before she interrupts you again. Everything is cold, barren, and dark. Death swallows up whatever is not protected. To keep her eggs growing, the mother must bathe them constantly in new waves of water, nourishing them with oxygen and shielding them from predators and debris.

Do all the mothers do this? she asks. Or just this particular octopus?

All the octopuses who are mothers. They don't move or eat.

This is not the kind of story I had in mind, she remarks.

A good story moves. It glides and slithers like an octopus in a way that is unexpected yet inevitable.

Yes, I know that. You aren't smarter than me, you know.

I have always known that.

Well, go on and finish it. What happens to the octopus? When does she get to eat? Will her babies survive?

The babies in the eggs get bigger and stronger. They are eager to begin their own lives. But they are also small. The mother knows this. She, too, has become small. She is weaker now. Without food and exercise, her tangle of arms goes dull and gray. Her eyes sink into their sockets.

I don't think I like where this is going.

Just bear with me a little longer, you say. When the eggs are about to hatch, the mother octopus thrusts her arms to help the babies emerge; she may throw herself rocks, or mutilate herself. She may consume parts of her own tentacles. This is her final act, you see. And then, with her last bit of strength, she uses her siphon to blow the eggs free. Those perfect miniatures of their mother, with tiny tentacles and an inborn sense of what they must—

No! she interrupts. I see what you are doing.

What? you respond. Jesus, what is it?

You are doing the predictable thing. Just what you say a story is not supposed to do.

I don't know how to tell it any other way, you say quietly.

Why don't you have a choice? she asks.

Stop it, stop it! you interject. I am talking to my dead mother in a made-up story. You would never use that word: "choice."

But I am free to do whatever I want now, she says.

Now that you are dead?

Now that I live only in *your* story.

But my story *is* your story, you say. What am I without you?

A thing that moves, your mother answers. A thing that is alive. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

A NETWORK EXECUTIVE WRITES A SITCOM

BY TEDDY WAYNE

> "We have been planning for this," [Paramount C.E.O. Bob Bakish] told Wall Street analysts . . . speaking to the WGA strike. . . . "We do have many levers to pull."
>
> —*Deadline, May 4th.*

"Tipplers": a situation-comedy teleplay for the 18-34 demographic.

INT. SALOON – NIGHT

The neighborhood watering hole is populated by blue-collar denizens of an untapped metropolitan market (one background extra is Black). In walks FRANKLIN (portly, salt of the earth, non-SAG).

FRANKLIN: Do not even converse with me until I have consumed my first mug of beer.

Laughter from audience—they expect this kind of "'tude" from FRANKLIN.

He sits before the barkeep, CHARLES (handsome, magnetic; I could play him for scale), who wipes alcoholic-beverage mugs.

CHARLES: Aren't things better down at your municipal workplace?

FRANKLIN: Yes, ever since we voted to dissolve our corrupt union. The problem, you see, is my battle-axe—excuse me, my wife. (*Audience laughter of recognition*) Because tonight is our anniversary, she forbad me from watching the big game with my drinking chums!

CHARLES: Then how are you here? For the ballplayers are about to take their positions!

FRANKLIN: She is next door at Antonio's, the Italian restaurant we always refer to. She mistakenly believes I am in the men's room now. Tonight I shall practice subterfuge by running back and forth between the two locations!

CHARLES: In that case, let me make you a "double."

He pours two bottles of ale into a mug. (Multiple product-placement oppo here.)

Walking by with a tray of glasses is the waitress, JENNY (twenty-one, blond knockout, not enough lines to qualify for screen credit).

FRANKLIN: Hey, Jenny, when are you going to leave that ne'er-do-well punk boyfriend and run off with me?

JENNY: As soon as you divorce that nagging harpy of yours!

Audience laughter, as it understands this is harmless flirtation between adults.

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

FRANKLIN breathlessly rejoins his wife, LINDA (over forty). He peeks at the big game on his cellular phone under the table.

LINDA: Mother has been having trouble taking care of herself. What do you think about having her move in?

FRANKLIN (*pumps fist at game*): Yes!

LINDA: You're O.K. with my mother living with us?

FRANKLIN: I never agreed to that!

LINDA: I just asked. You said, "Yes!"

FRANKLIN: No, I was reacting to the big—

LINDA (*puts hands on hips and cocks head suspiciously*): The big what?

INT. SALOON – NIGHT

FRANKLIN: Looks like I'm living with Queen Battle-Axe—excuse me, my mother-in-law.

JENNY (*flirty*): My offer still stands.

FRANKLIN: Really?

The roar of a motorcycle outside. JOE (hunky, too dumb to review his one-day contract) enters holding a boom box blasting a public-domain rock-and-roll song.

JOE: Ready for the roller derby, babe?

JENNY: Missed your chance, Frank.

She leaves with JOE.

FRANKLIN: Think she was serious?

CHARLES (*sarcastically*): Oh, yeah.

Audience howls. (Note to sound: no laugh track needed—this is gold.)

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

FRANKLIN retakes his seat.

LINDA: I received great news while you were in the men's room!

FRANKLIN: I didn't go to the— (*robotic monotone that the audience recognizes as "acting"*) Oh, yes. The men's room.

LINDA: Mother accepted our invitation! She's moving in tomorrow.

FRANKLIN (*smiling wide, but we get the subtext: he's unhappy*): Terrific.

He drinks straight from the bottle of wine. The audience whoops as he polishes it off—classic FRANKLIN.

FRANKLIN: I need the men's room.

LINDA: That's the sixth time tonight. Are you distracted by something?

FRANKLIN: Just . . . (*A beat—what's he going to come up with now?*) your ravishing beauty, my dear.

They kiss. The audience "aww"s. FRANKLIN slowly lifts his phone behind LINDA's head to watch.

LINDA: Mother asked if she could take our bedroom.

FRANKLIN (*watching the game*): Yes!

LINDA: Really?

INT. SALOON – NIGHT

CHARLES: Now that you're not being gouged into paying union dues, what will you spend your money on?

FRANKLIN (*holds head in hands*): A foldout couch.

Freeze-frame as CHARLES pours three bottles of ale into a mug. The audience's laughter turns into a standing ovation for the show's courageous pro-management stance. ◆

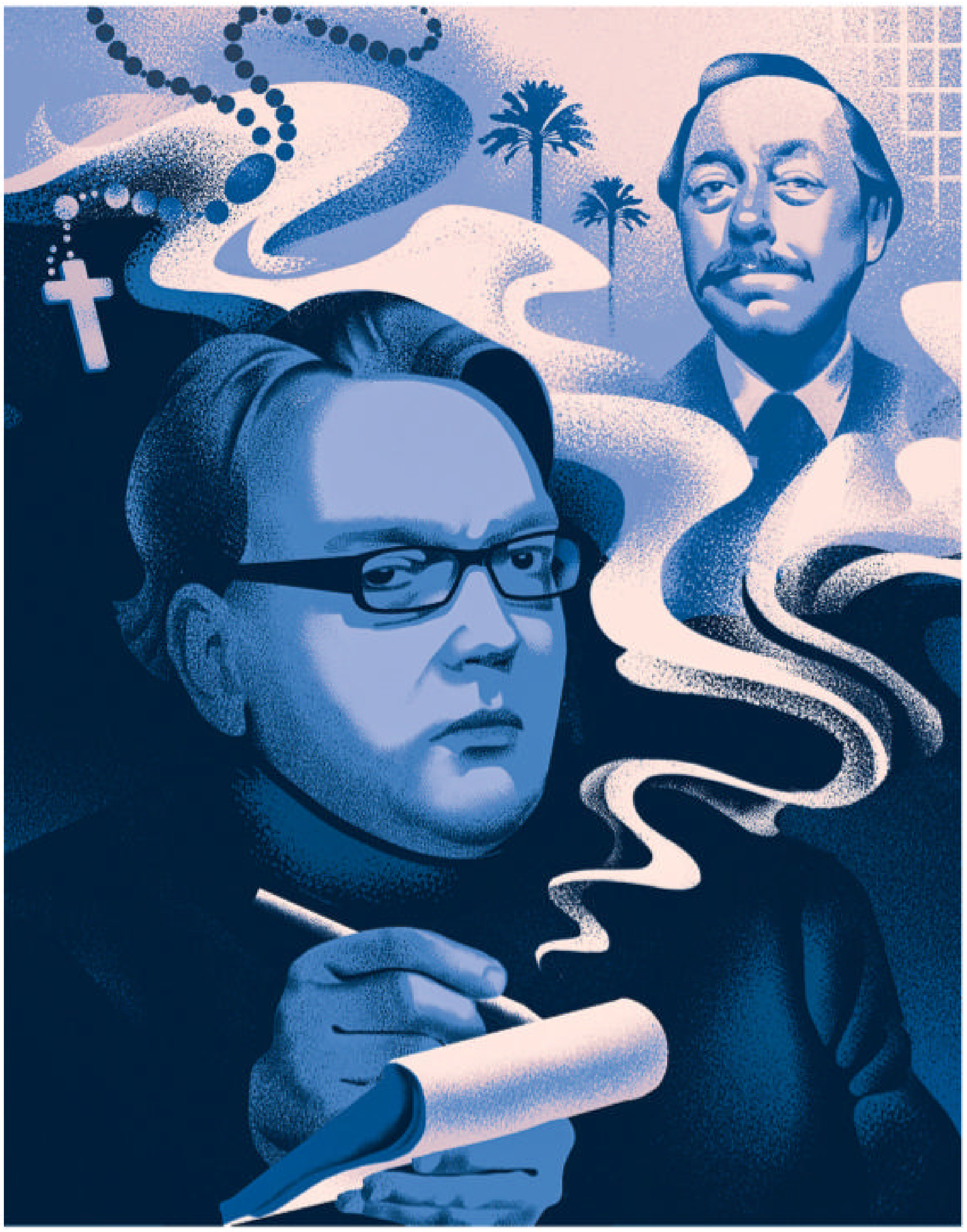
LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

LIFE AND LETTERS

THE INTERVIEW ARTIST

James Grissom met Tennessee Williams—and suddenly knew everybody.

BY HELEN SHAW



Sometime in September, 1982, James Grissom, a twenty-year-old English student at Louisiana State University, receives a life-changing phone call from Tennessee Williams. It doesn't come completely out of the blue: Grissom had sent a fan letter to the playwright, enclosing a picture and a few short stories, and asking for advice. But the response, Grissom would write decades later, surpasses his wildest hopes. When he picks up the receiver, a rough voice drawls down the line, "Perhaps you can be of some help to me."

On the phone, the famously dissipated playwright tells Grissom that he is having a creative crisis. He has always begun his plays by imagining a woman walking across a stage, "announced by the arrival of a fog," but he hasn't seen this fog in years: the calcifying effects of time and "monumental accretions of toxins self-administered" have left him unable to write at his "previous level of power."

Grissom drives from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, and, at the Court of Two Sisters Restaurant, Williams dictates to him a list of writers, directors, and (mostly) actresses. Grissom jots the names down on a menu. Williams wants Grissom to convey his thoughts to these muses—specific praise, a memory—and then find out what Williams has meant to them. "I would like for you to ask these people if I ever mattered," the playwright says.

Grissom says that the playwright gave him a life-changing mission.

So begins "Follies of God: Tennessee Williams and the Women of the Fog," a book by James Grissom, which was published by Knopf in 2015. (Knopf is the publisher of several *New Yorker* collections and writers.) Grissom's haunted, nonlinear, detail-rich book intertwines interviews with the playwright (who is by turns garrulous, melancholy, transported, resolute) and Grissom's subsequent wide-ranging conversations with those who influenced him. In "Follies," Grissom writes that, in the course of five days that September, the two men—one a seventy-one-year-old giant of American letters, the other a lanky college student scribbling notes in a blue exam booklet—pinballed around New Orleans while Williams talked about his favorite performers, his faith, his lovers, his great plays, and his determination to return to work. In the St. Louis Cathedral, the white wedding cake that towers above Jackson Square, Williams bought Grissom a rosary, naming each bead for an inspiration: Maureen Stapleton, Lillian Gish, Stella Adler . . . the catalogue went on.

Grissom recounts that weeks before Williams died, in February, 1983, the playwright called his house and left a message: "Be my witness." It took Grissom six years, but once he moved to New York he began reaching out to the names on his list, bearing Williams's words as his calling card. It's astounding the interviews Grissom managed to get—the book includes a constellation of twentieth-century luminaries, among them Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, and Marlon Brando. There are also less widely known figures, like the elegant trouper Marian Seldes, who won a Tony Award for lifetime achievement in 2010, and two women who performed in revivals of "The Glass Menagerie": Jo Van Fleet and Lois Smith, who won a Tony in 2021, at the age of ninety, for her role in "The Inheritance." Grissom chronicles a remarkable intimacy with his subjects. He describes sitting with Stapleton as she drinks Blue Nun sweet wine; talking with Hepburn over bowls of ice cream; and lying in bed next to Kim Hunter, the original Stella from "A Streetcar Named Desire," so they can

ILLUSTRATION BY VALENTIN TKACH

listen through the wall to a play at the theatre next door.

Victoria Wilson, a legendary Knopf editor whose writers have included Anne Rice and the biographer Meryle Secrest, acquired the book and worked on it with Grissom for almost ten years. In the intervening decade, Grissom started releasing some of his material online, which brought him into various Williams orbits—he spoke at the 2009 Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference, in New Orleans, as part of its "I Remember Tennessee" panel. Over the years, Grissom launched Twitter and Instagram accounts, a "Follies of God" Facebook page (which now has more than a hundred and ninety-four thousand followers), a Substack newsletter (which currently lists more than seven hundred posts), and several blogs, including one dedicated to "Follies of God." On these platforms, he began publishing quotations from Williams and his muses, as well as reflections shared with him in the nineties by Alec Guinness, Arthur Miller, Mike Nichols, Eartha Kitt, and others. (One blog, mainly pictures, is called "Faking the Fog.")

In 2015, Grissom went on a book tour, and Wilson interviewed him at a Barnes & Noble on the Upper West Side. "From the moment I got this manuscript," Wilson said, "I knew this book had greatness." In a video of the event, Grissom—then fifty-three, his fine, graying hair combed back, the "Follies" rosary around his neck—is an easy and gracious raconteur, chatting about how he and Williams used to do impressions together of the comic actor Charles Nelson Reilly. Wilson herself is steeped in American performance history: she edited the letters of Williams and his longtime friend Maria St. Just, and wrote a biography of Barbara Stanwyck. Wilson told the crowd, "This is without question, as far as I'm concerned, the best book on Tennessee Williams ever written."

The book is more than four hundred pages, but there clearly wasn't room for everything Grissom had gathered. In his acknowledgments, he thanks a hundred and thirteen people who were "generous with their time and their memories." Only seven of these are cited in the book, and, oddly, many of the starriest on the list (Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman) are quoted solely on his blogs. Grissom writes that he received a series of phone calls from Brando in the early nineties, but most of that material—in which the actor held forth on everything from manliness to Christian Science—was reserved for the Web, too.

The scale of Grissom's interviews, between the online material and the book, is staggering, as is the number of people Williams seemingly counted as north stars. Grissom quotes him praising, at length, more than a hundred separate artists, ranging from Barbra Streisand to Federico Fellini. The playwright's observations weren't all from five days of conversation; Grissom says they had a few phone calls and that Williams also gave him written tributes to transcribe. Still, the range is surprising: the playwright says he noticed Annette O'Toole in the schlock remake of "Cat People" and describes Holland Taylor as "crafted of bisque" after seeing her, Grissom posits, in an episode of "Bosom Buddies."

"Follies" wasn't reviewed by any major outlets, but smaller papers raved. The Tampa Bay *Times* called it "the real deep dish," and the *Connecticut Post* declared it "some of the best writing on theater and actresses you will ever encounter." The memoir was blurbed by the publishing heavyweight Michael Korda, who said it was "electrifying," and by the playwright John Guare, who described it as an "original, hypnotic . . . bound-to-be-controversial document." Guare is mentioned in the book and knew Williams—they had made an Atlantic crossing on the QE 2 in adjacent cabins.

After the book's publication, Grissom's work circulated widely. A *Times Style Magazine* piece on James Baldwin used a Brando quote from a Grissom interview. Mark Harris included quotes from a Grissom post in his 2021 biography of Mike Nichols. And a Williams phrase from a Grissom interview shared on Facebook—"We live in a perpetually burning building, and what we must save from it, all the time, is love"—even appeared on the chaplaincy Web site at the University of Edinburgh, as one of its daily prayers and reflections. (None of these quotes had appeared in "Follies.")

A few commenters on Goodreads and Amazon, though, observed that Grissom's book didn't include sources or notes. Grissom explains in "Follies" that he almost never taped his interviews, and that his "ultimately more than twenty" blue books have "long since deteriorated," their contents transferred over the decades onto word processors and computers. Others pointed out that Grissom hadn't provided concrete dates for his interviews. The idea that his notebooks had "deteriorated" also struck some readers as odd. "As if he had taken notes in 1882, not 1982," one skeptic wrote.

In 2015, most of the people Grissom had quoted in the book were dead, so it was hard to double-check that his encounters had taken place. His online quotes from artistic figures sometimes appeared uncannily timed, published just after their deaths. People in the theatre world noticed. The director Mark Armstrong told me that he and his friends message one another when anyone famous dies: "We'll say, 'Oh, looking forward to James Grissom's interview with, you know, Angela Lansbury coming next week.'" Grissom hasn't posted anything about Lansbury, but when Nichols died, in November, 2014, he posted an excerpt from an interview with him for the first time four days later.

On January 9, 2017, on Facebook, Augustin Correro, the co-founder of the Tennessee Williams Theatre Company of New Orleans, called Grissom's "Follies" blog "post-truth." Correro soon saw an unusual set of excoriating online reviews on his theatre company's Facebook page, made by profiles that seemed strangely two-dimensional—some of which he successfully challenged as fake and had taken down. He posted at length about the experience, specifically blaming Grissom and calling his material "unverifiable." Correro's comments were reposted by Randall Rapstine, who was then a graduate student at Texas Tech University.

Grissom escalated the situation by sending an e-mail that March to Rapstine's adviser at T.T.U., Mark Charney. "It has also been brought to my attention that you . . . have stated that the book is false," he wrote, adding that Knopf's lawyers were beginning legal proceedings against Charney, Correro, and Rapstine. In the same e-mail, Grissom said that he had "worked more than two decades on the book, and all relevant materials proving this were given to my publishers"; he also claimed that his notebooks were being sent to the Harry Ransom Center, at the University of Texas at Austin. (Eric Colleary, a curator of performing arts at the Ransom Center, has no record of Grissom ever contacting the archive. Knopf declined to comment on Grissom's claim regarding legal action; Rapstine said that no case ensued.)

Then, on June 16, 2020, Grissom posted a piece called "We Will Die of Stupidity," subtitled "Interview with Harold Pinter, conducted by James Grissom, via telephone, 1991." In it, the playwright observes to Grissom, "You and I can find each other within a day via an e-mail," which raised eyebrows—very few people had e-mail in 1991. (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that he "did not talk to Pinter until 1997 and 1998. This could be a typo on my part or a misunderstanding.")

Last October, Kara Manning, an employee of the public-radio station WFUV, questioned a Pinter quote from Grissom. "This doesn't sound like Pinter at all," Manning wrote on Facebook. "Curious. Are there any tapes of these interviews?" Grissom responded, "Yes, there are tapes. And notes." But, rather than producing them, within four days he published a Substack essay in which he called Manning a "Disturbed Online Stalker," and included a picture of her and the name of her workplace. On Facebook, he wrote, "She danced with slander, and she may now dance with unemployment." Manning was so concerned that she contacted Kathryn Zuckerman, the Knopf publicist who had worked on "Follies," asking her to intervene. Grissom then sent Manning an e-mail that included the line, in all caps, "I AM GOING TO SUE YOU."

On April 3rd, I e-mailed Grissom, telling him that I was writing about his work and the questions surrounding "Follies of God." He phoned me that night at around ten o'clock. We spoke—with a break for him to call me from a landline when his cell died—until 2 A.M.

Grissom is an engaging, if digressive, anecdotalist. Referring to Gus Weill, a playwright turned advertising agent he said he worked for in Louisiana, he noted that Weill's 1978 play, "The November People," had closed after one performance on Broadway and that "the New York *Times* review suggested that the Billy Rose Theatre be fumigated." (His memory is sharp: the actual review said it "may need an airing.") During the first two hours, he framed parts of our conversation as a kind of bantering quiz. Hadn't I heard of Weill? But someone had told him I was a scholar! He pivoted throughout our interview, sometimes laughing at his own colorful biography, sometimes complaining wearily about how he has been treated by those who have doubted him. "It speaks, I think, to something far bigger than either of us," he said. "It is so easy to hate and to malign someone you don't know."

Grissom calls "Follies" a memoir, but it contains few details about his life. James Grissom, Jr., was born in October, 1961, in Baton Rouge, the youngest of four children. His father, James, Sr., was an electrician who worked for a chemical-manufacturing company; his mother, Winnie, worked at the Baton Rouge Clinic. Jimmy, as he was then called, attended Baton Rouge High School, where he was a fixture in the drama department. On a 1978 class trip to New York, Grissom says, he saw Marian Seldes in "Deathtrap" and went backstage to have her sign a copy of her autobiography. This encounter, he told me, led to their long friendship. (They exchanged so many letters, he has said, that when they met again in 1989 she dumped them out on a table and told him, "This is a book.") In Grissom's senior yearbook, he's featured as the class clown: "His personality is so Steve Martinish it is impossible to ever anticipate his next move." In the accompanying picture, he's wearing striped suspenders. (It was 1979.)

Grissom was raised Southern Baptist, but, he said, he was abused in the Church, which drove him away. He said he felt that his family, which was otherwise loving and supportive, blamed him for the abuse: "They didn't know how to deal with a gay kid." After high school, he told me, he contributed arts reviews to local papers and, in 1980, he appeared on a local TV morning program. There he met Pat White, a Baton Rouge native who had become a television actor in New York. "When my mother saw Pat White on the set, she went, 'Jim is going to come home being friends with her,' because she moved to New York and she had this glamorous life," Grissom said. "Of course, we became friends."

Two years after his fateful trip to New Orleans, he dropped out of his L.S.U. English program. He was living at home in Baton Rouge, working a series of jobs and drafting short stories, when White told him about a seventy-nine-year-old artist living in Manhattan who needed a roommate. He moved there in 1989.

In New York, he socialized with Seldes, and with other older New York actresses, including Jo Van Fleet and Lois Smith. These women created a network—and a soft place to land. Soon, a Louisiana acquaintance, who was renting a room in an apartment on the Upper West Side from a woman named Rose Byrnes, invited him to move in. He's still there. "They're gonna have to take me out in a box," he told me, "because it's rent-stabilized and it's *eight rooms*. And the woman who had the lease I married." In 2014, James S. Grissom (then fifty-two) married his roommate Rose M. Byrnes (then seventy-six). She died in July of 2019.

His work pursuits in the nineties and two-thousands were, as he described them, picaresque. There were media gigs (copy-editing at *Penthouse*, selling classifieds for the *Times*); sales positions in upmarket food stores (Dean & Deluca, Ecce Panis); jobs in restaurants (Acme, Artisanal). Grissom also clerked in museums (the Met and MOMA), worked at front desks (the Princeton Club, the Carlyle Hotel), and even had a stint as a receptionist and a script reader for the producer Daryl Roth.

Grissom was an employee at the Carlyle from March, 1998, to December 16, 1999. (He's exact about that date.) He suggested that I talk to his friend the director Joe Calarco, who also worked at the hotel’s front desk in 1998. Calarco recalled the two of them standing around in their tuxedos, bonding over theatre; he remembered, too, hearing about Tennessee Williams. “That was the big one for me,” Calarco said. According to Grissom’s blog, he interviewed Elizabeth Taylor at the Carlyle in 1991. I asked Calarco if he had ever heard that Grissom spoke with Taylor in the very place where they worked. “Oh, no,” he said.

Grissom managed an Amy’s Bread location from 2002 to 2004; Amy Scherber, the bakery’s founder, still has great affection for him. Every day, he would have “hilarious stories about the staff and customers,” she told me. (“I think it was the Southern upbringing,” Grissom said. “I can talk to anybody.”) Scherber recalled that when he left he was going to do “freelance writing for some TV show.” Grissom’s IMDb page lists several credits, but he told me that a lot of the information is wrong, and that his work was mainly in punching up other writers’ scripts. “I did a lot—‘Law & Order: Trial by Jury.’ I can’t remember how I got that job,” he said. “I think someone just said, ‘Oh, he’s fast—and he can imitate anybody.’”

In the days following our call, I noticed that certain biographical details have proved malleable. In 2005, a short story of Grissom’s—what he calls his only published piece of fiction—appeared in the collection “Fresh Men 2: New Voices in Gay Fiction.” In that book, his biography notes that he “studied at Louisiana State University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Brown University”; his “Follies” bio states that he attended L.S.U. and Penn. (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that he attended L.S.U. and went to conferences at the Ivy League schools.)

His account of the late Marian Seldes’s role in his life has shifted a bit, too: in “Follies of God,” there is just their friendship; promoting his book in a “Theater Talk” television interview, Grissom said that she was the one who encouraged him to write to his idol in the eighties; and at an event at Books & Books in Coral Gables, Florida, he said that she vouched for him on the phone with Williams after their first contact. In Florida, he referred to her as his teacher at Juilliard, though that story has changed as well. He told *The New Yorker* that he auditioned for Juilliard, got in, but never attended. He and Seldes did know each other; there is a picture of them together in 1997, and many people I spoke with talked about how much they adored each other. Her daughter, Katharine Andres, described the relationship between Seldes and Grissom as “symbiotic.” Andres did not, however, know how far back it stretched.

What we know about Tennessee Williams in the last year of his life is simultaneously a great deal and not enough. In addition to his other, more well-known addictions (alcohol, prescription barbiturates), he never stopped working, and scholars are still digging through drafts and fragments in the four main archives—at Harvard, Columbia, the Ransom Center, and the Historic New Orleans Collection. The writer Ellen F. Brown, who is working on a cradle-to-grave biography of him, has catalogued more than fifteen hundred unpublished letters.

Grissom describes Williams as being creatively blocked at the time they supposedly met, but, in 1982, the playwright had at least three pieces in some stage of production, and there are drafts of seven full-length plays which date from his final year. The record does have inconsistencies. Some people I spoke to referred to Williams’s own tendency to tell yarns. (“This is a man who feigned heart attacks in the middle of a show just to leave,” John Lahr, the longtime *New Yorker* staff writer and the author of the 2014 biography “Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh,” told me.) Williams also allowed acquaintances to stay in his many homes, and, according to a letter he sent to Maria St. Just, he suspected that one of them might be stealing manuscripts. The appetite for material to fill in the gaps is bottomless. Yet “Follies of God” was mostly ignored in Williams circles; by the time it came out, Grissom had largely stopped being invited to speak at the festivals. Guare remembers being surprised that the book didn’t have a bigger impact. “I was fascinated that the Williams aficionados . . . were not overwhelmed,” he said.

I wanted to meet these Williams aficionados, so I went to New Orleans this

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"We haven't lost one sock or shoe since installing the net."

• •

spring to attend the Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference. The community is small. At a panel on Williams and "The Sense of Place," David Kaplan, the co-founder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival, looked down the table and said, "If the roof falls in, we lose a good deal of Williams scholarship." The playwright's vulnerability, especially at the end of his life, and his courtly attention to characters at the social margin endear him to his acolytes and readers in a way that goes beyond his work: several speakers imitated his rasping drawl when they quoted him.

Thomas Keith, a consulting editor at Williams's publisher, New Directions, has edited more than twenty Williams titles. I asked him what he might expect to see in a series of interviews conducted with Williams in September, 1982. "Anything about his new plays . . . his sister Rose and his care for her, the friends he kept in touch with, his many health issues, revisions to his will and legal matters, and the day-to-day affairs of life," Keith said. "He was always polite about interest in his early successes, but his focus was primarily on his new work." But, when Williams speaks to Grissom, he is preoccupied by the dramas that had secured his legacy decades before, like "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." On Meryl Streep: "She will age into the most extraordinary Blanche." On Annette O'Toole: "She could grow into a Maggie."

Some specialists told me that "Follies of God" wasn't of interest to them because, without transparent sourcing, they couldn't rely on it for their own work. But there are several Williams memoirs—including that of his mother, Edwina, "Remember Me to Tom," and his friend Dotson Rader's "Tennessee Williams: Cry of the Heart"—that have been carefully read as subjective accounts. John S. Bak, a professor at the Université de Lorraine and a specialist in Williams's last twenty years, said of "Follies," "Everyone, probably, within the tight-knit community recognizes the book as—oh, I don't want to say 'fluff,' but as undocumented, and therefore perhaps unreliable." Some seemed leery of speaking on the record with me about Grissom, and, when I asked Bak why, he said that Grissom has a reputation as "rather a voracious individual who has connections apparently high up and uses those connections to create lawsuits and legal issues." Bak, at least, was willing to go on the record. "He was never ever that coherent, philosophical, poetic or winded in any interview I heard him deliver," he wrote me later, referring to Williams. And, he added, "he called his mother 'mother' and not 'mama.'"

Lahr also objected to the book's language. His Williams biography came out only six months before "Follies of God." (It won the National Book Critics Circle Award for biography, and was a finalist for the National Book Award. It also includes more than a hundred pages of notes.) Lahr observed that the women-from-the-fog creative process, which is so central to Grissom's narrative—in "Follies," "fog" is mentioned more than forty times—is sui generis. "There are books about his conversations. There are two volumes of published letters. There is a diary. There was not one mention of this. None," Lahr said. (I could find only one reference to fog and inspiration in his essays, letters, notebooks, and memoirs: a 1936 journal entry—"Maybe if I look hard enough into this fog I'll begin to see God's face.")

Then, there are the discrepancies that tear at the book's underlying fabric. For instance, Grissom repeatedly mentions Williams doing cocaine—"the porcelain countertop in the bathroom appeared to have been utilized by a manic baker"—but Rader told me that Williams didn't use cocaine. And Grissom sometimes seems to be revising theatre history itself. Williams's elegiac "Summer and Smoke" was largely panned when it opened on Broadway, in 1948. Then, in April, 1952, in an Off Broadway revival, the director José Quintero and the actress Geraldine Page turned the flop into a sensation. Grissom offers pages of overlapping interviews with Williams, Quintero, and Page to create a portrait of their collaboration on the production. But Ellen F. Brown, the biographer, notes that this "directly contradicts what the key players said." According to Quintero's 1974 autobiography, he didn't meet Williams until the writer came to see the show. In a 1959 interview, housed at the Oral History Archives at Columbia, Page is asked if Williams was "in evidence at all" during "Smoke." "Not till we'd been playing I guess a month or two," she says.

Biographers outside the Williams circuit have also had doubts. William J. Mann, who wrote "Kate: The Woman Who Was Hepburn" (a 2006 *Times* Notable Book of the Year) and "The Contender: The Story of Marlon Brando," told me that Grissom's accounts of his conversations with Hepburn in "Follies" "just didn't ring true." (Grissom wrote, for example, that Hepburn cried.) Mann showed the Brando quotes to Avra Douglas, Brando's onetime assistant and now a trustee of his estate, who replied, "I've never heard Marlon mention him, nor have I seen any evidence of their connection in the archive." (Grissom's next book, another memoir, has the working title "The Lake of the Mind: Brando in the Night.")

Some people I spoke with assumed that Knopf had fact-checked "Follies." But a lot of nonfiction books come to market without being fact-checked: the legal burden for accuracy generally rests on the author, not on the publisher. Some writers choose to pay out of pocket for a fact checker, which can cost between five thousand and twenty thousand dollars. (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that he did not hire an outside fact checker.) Most books are vetted in-house by lawyers, but, as Mann explained to me, "basically, what they're looking for is 'Am I saying anything that might be libellous about someone who's still alive?' " A standard publishing practice, the so-called "legal read," scans for elements that might be accusatory, defamatory, libellous, or negative. "Positive lies could easily slip through," Mann said.

Academic journals rely instead on peer review. *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* is currently edited by Richard Barton Palmer, and it has published only one Grissom quote, in a 2017 article about Anna Magnani, by the scholar Tiffany Gilbert. Palmer said that there was some debate about its inclusion and that the choice not to remove it "was, between us, a mistake." (Gilbert said she was never told that the quote had been questioned and would have happily excised it.) An editorial-board member told me that those who argued to keep it pointed out that "Follies" was published by a reputable press. Who, then, is the gatekeeper of truth? "The gate is shaky," Palmer said, with a laugh.

In our conversation, Grissom seemed aware of his reputation. He mentioned a *New Yorker* piece about Dan Mallory, the author who made up his own backstory—"I just think that's what the piece is, that I'm this fabulist." He complained that, while he had plenty of supporting material, I was eight years late in asking to see it. "I'm done with it," Grissom said. "I don't know why this keeps coming up." He doesn't seem to be altogether done, though. In April, he wrote an article for the online weekly Air Mail about Nancy Schoenberger's new book, "Blanche: The Life and Times of Tennessee Williams's Greatest Creation." Grissom spends much of his essay quoting from previously unpublished conversations he'd had with Williams.

Grissom told me that believing "Follies of God" comes down to a question of his word. "For a long time, the charge was 'Why are there no source notes?' Well, because I'm the source," Grissom said. "It's a memoir. It's not a biography."

Grissom has been the source of other stories as well. In 2016, he wrote a Facebook post saying that he had been diagnosed as having bladder cancer, in 2007, and, uninsured and desperate, he had turned to then Senator Hillary Clinton's office for help. He reported that Clinton told him, personally, "You need to fight this cancer and get well: You don't have time for this nonsense." The post was picked up by *People*, Out.com, and *Time*. *Cosmopolitan* ran an article titled "This Man's Story About Hillary Clinton Is Going Viral Because It's Honestly the *Best,*" which was updated with a Facebook comment from Clinton, thanking him for sharing his experiences. (Clinton could not be reached for comment.)

On a GoFundMe page titled "Fighting the Right," which he established early the following year, Grissom wrote that his tribute to Clinton "apparently enraged some particularly virulent Republicans," who thought his story was a paid-for lie. He claimed that three unnamed Republican congressmen "illegally seized" his bank accounts, and, in response, he sued them. Grissom eventually raised $35,929, which he said, on Facebook, would help him file these lawsuits and travel to Washington, D.C., to testify before Congress. Online, he chronicled at least seven supposed appearances, including before the House Oversight Committee. On January 18, 2019, he wrote, "Mueller is in the room. Is it inappropriate to give testimony with an erection?" He wrote in 2020 that he was grateful in particular to Nancy Pelosi, who had "been at my side for three years."

He was, he said, in litigation on other fronts, too. Grissom's former literary agent, Edward Hibbert, who sold "Follies" to Knopf, was one of the principals in the agency Donadio & Olson, which filed for bankruptcy in December, 2018, the same month that its former bookkeeper, Darin Webb, was sentenced to two years for embezzling more than $3.3 million. Grissom had posted that he was also "suing the literary agency that fucked me and others over." A search of relevant legal databases did not turn up any litigation with James Grissom's name attached to it, in New York or in the District of Columbia. Nor does his name appear in the *Congressional Record*. According to Pelosi's office, "Speaker Emerita Pelosi has no recollection of any interactions referenced in this reporting, and our office has no records of any interactions between them." (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that he has never threatened to sue anyone—"I pointed out to Kara Manning that her actions might be seen as actionable"—and that he can't discuss the congressional situation because of an N.D.A.)

The actress Martha Plimpton was a Facebook connection of Grissom's—he told her that Williams had noticed her as a child actor—and at first, Plimpton said, she let his dubious claims pass by. "He told me, 'I'm working with higher-ups at HBO, and I mentioned you for a major series.' And I would just say, 'Oh, O.K., thank you,' " she said. Once Grissom started raising money to fight the right, Plimpton's discomfort increased. "I started noticing that more and more people were sharing these quotes from 'Follies of God' that were just clearly writing," she said. "They have the same kind of rambling, wonderfully fanciful, sympathetic quality to them." She unfriended Grissom, and posted about the lack of corroborating evidence in public records. In February, 2022, Grissom posted a Facebook screed about “people with whom I am working at HBO and Netflix” and about a certain unnamed actress who might be denied employment for her “slander.”

He has also written, on Facebook, about working on various awards campaigns, including Natalie Portman’s Oscar push for “Jackie.” He described their growing intimacy and brought up Benjamin Millepied, Portman’s husband: “I will post the video of me trying to get into and zip up a pair of pants belonging to Benjamin Millepied. Like a piano through a transom and funnier than Chaplin. I have a future in comedy, not to mention Millepied’s pants.” (A spokesperson from Portman’s team said that she has never met Grissom. HBO has no record of his working for the company.)

When I asked Grissom if he had met Portman, he demurred. “Define ‘meet,’” he said. When I mentioned the Clinton story and the ensuing lawsuits, he balked. When I asked to see evidence for “Follies,” he brought up legal action. “And I don’t think a defense will be ‘He didn’t want to show me certain things,’” he said.

In fact, he did provide some evidence. After our conversation, he sent me a tranche of images via direct message which included a piece of paper with actresses’ names written in colored pencil (when I asked about the Court of Two Sisters menu, he said, “Tennessee asked the waiter and he brought me this linen-type paper”); a receipt of Jo Van Fleet’s; e-mails from the actresses Madeleine Sherwood, Lois Smith, and Frances Sternhagen; and signed and dedicated copies of Seldes’s and Elia Kazan’s autobiographies. I was surprised that he did not include the signed and typewritten note from Hepburn, which says, “Dear Jim Grissom— Too bad Tennessee never told me that— I thought he was—is and always will be remarkable”; it’s the only picture of personal correspondence in “Follies.”

He also sent me my own head shot, and asked if it was my “preferred photograph.”

He was more resistant to providing the Pinter tapes (“How much am I supposed to give?”), the letters from Seldes or the blue books or any contemporaneous notes (“I know what you want”), or anything in Williams’s hand. (“If a videotape appeared mysteriously tomorrow, like a Zapruder film, and it showed me with Tennessee sitting at a sidewalk café, I don’t think it would quell anything.”) He insisted that the book had been vetted by Knopf—“With Vicky, it’d be easier to go before The Hague,” he said, referring to his editor—and that the publisher had seen the materials I was inquiring about. In hour four of our call, I said, “I just don’t understand why you won’t let me see the stuff you’ve shown other people. If you’ve shown it to other people, it’s out there.” Grissom replied, “I’ve also not shown you my penis. I’ve shown other people. You know, there are times and places for things to be shown. . . . I don’t understand someone just showing up out of thin air and demanding to see documents.”

Our conversation ended cordially; we were talking about places near his home where we could meet to talk. But, about a week later, I realized that I had been blocked from both his personal Facebook page and the “Follies of God” Facebook page. Then Grissom sent me an e-mail. “Dear Ms. Shaw,” he wrote. “I am reaching out today to those entities in possession of my material comprising Follies of God. When I receive this material, we will make scans or photographs of relevant items.”

When I finally reached Edward Hibbert, he told me that he took on Grissom and his book after reading the sequence on Jo Van Fleet. It’s the finest writing in “Follies,” a compassionate but gimlet-eyed portrait of a frustrated actress in her seventies. Grissom tells her that the choreographer Jerome Robbins has praised her, but she responds, “Fuck him! He never called me, never sent me a dime!” There’s something terribly recognizable in Van Fleet’s desperation not to be discarded. When Hibbert sold the book to Knopf, he vouched for it on the strength of that passage.

As Grissom turned in more sections, though, Hibbert “slowly, incrementally” lost faith, he told me, noting that “the interviews sound alike.” He says he brought his concerns to Knopf, before publication, multiple times. (Knopf declined to comment on this point.)

Then, on May 28th, nearly two months after I’d asked to see his contemporaneous notes, Grissom e-mailed me twenty-six photographs of handwritten pages, including an undated diary entry (“can I help him be a writer again?”), five closely written pages from an exam booklet with scenes that appear in “Follies,” and notes on conversations with Alec Guinness and Harold Pinter. There was also a photo of the front of a 1991 journal. I asked where these documents had been—Knopf had told me that he was recovering them from archives—and he e-mailed back, “They were not at Ransom. I seriously

GROCERIES for the UNCONFIDENT
IMPERFECT FRUIT
Admit it: those eye-dazzling displays of flawlessness make you uncomfortable.
ADEQUATE CEREAL
Do you require handcrafted granola bedecked with Swedish lingonberries, Turkish pistachios, and a soupçon of Nepalese ginger? We didn't think so.
ORDINARY CHEESE
Because who are you, Louis XIV?
This Brie bores me.
R. Chast

considered Ransom, but people who looked over the things I had suggested other places. That is all I will say." (Harvard, Columbia, and the Historic New Orleans Collection do not show records of any of Grissom's Williams material in their digital catalogues.) I asked to see the documents in person; he declined. I asked if Knopf had seen them before now; he did not reply. I showed the Alec Guinness materials to Hibbert, and he wrote, "I've seen none of them nor did he show me any of these pages."

Knopf offered the following statement, delivered through an attorney:

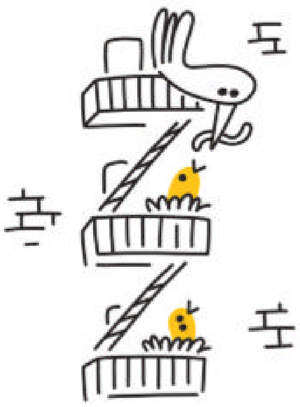
> In his contract with Knopf for FOLLIES OF GOD, James Grissom warranted that the content of the book was entirely factual. He stands by that guarantee. Grissom's source materials included in-person interviews with both Tennessee Williams and actresses who performed his works, as well as the author's copious notes from which the book was drawn. In the seven years since its publication, participants in FOLLIES such as Lois Smith, Marian Seldes, and others never wavered in their support for the book nor challenged Grissom's narrative.

(Seldes died the year before the book came out.)

Grissom's highly shareable quotations have carried his work far. The whisper network has done its bit to counteract his influence; the academic cold shoulder has, too. But Grissom's material continues to be more widely distributed than anything written in *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*. And it can be hard to be definitive about which voices ring true. When I asked Antonia Fraser, Harold Pinter's widow, if Grissom's blogged interviews with Pinter sounded like him, she was divided. "I do not recognise Harold's voice in 'We Will Die of Stupidity,'" she responded. Of the other three I sent her, she thought two "could possibly be interviews with Harold."

What do Grissom's friends think of all this? Lois Smith—the last major figure quoted in "Follies" who is alive and able to answer questions—declined to speak with me. (The e-mail from her that he shared noted that they met in 1990.) The actor Lusia Strus met Grissom in 2016 and they were close for two years; she allowed their relationship to drift after he told her that Michael Avenatti, Stormy Daniels's lawyer, was hanging out in his apartment in his undershirt. She simply didn't believe him, but she is loath to judge. "He is reacting to life in this particular way," she said. "Nothing that he has said or done has been super harmful to anybody—it's just not real." (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that his comment about Avenatti was a joke.)

So, indeed, what is the harm? Grissom did pay attention to those who might have felt forgotten and gave them the gift of adoration by one of our most beloved American playwrights. And, in videos from his last few years, Williams slurs his words and looks somehow clammy—it would be nice to believe he met an eager student and talked to him about writing instead of about death.



In "Follies," Williams is certainly energetic, at once bombastic and dewy-eyed: "I try to approach the whiteness of the page, the pale judgment, as if I were a neophyte priest. . . . I touch it gently, a frightened queer faced with his first female breast, a nipple that seeks attention and ministration."

If you're a Williams scholar, or a Pinter devotee, or a Brando biographer, though, the issue seems clear-cut: Grissom is confusing an already fragile record. William J. Mann, the biographer, said, "There's great harm in it. We're living in a period right now where facts increasingly don't matter." That said, he's willing to give "Follies" a certain place. "I love fan fiction! I love historical fiction," Mann said. "But don't pass it off as truth."

James Frey exaggerated his life story in "A Million Little Pieces"; Clifford Irving invented an entire Howard Hughes autobiography and nearly got away with it. The former was a best-seller; the latter garnered a big advance. The creation of "Follies" and its associated ventures has not been all that financially lucrative. Williams didn't make Grissom rich. "I never got even poor," he said. But his connection to Williams has helped Grissom become part of a glittering twentieth-century theatrical legacy. He wanted access to a certain world, and he found it—Katharine Hepburn wrote him, whether or not they ate ice cream together. As I was researching this piece, I ordered a used copy of "Remember Me to Tom," and two notes from the actual Edwina Williams dropped out. History fell hot into my hands. I can understand chasing that strange, electrical feeling.

When I was in New Orleans, I went to all the places Grissom says he visited with Williams. Most of the cafés were overrun, but there were quiet street corners with personal resonance for the playwright where, according to "Follies," they spent time. Some looked like their descriptions, some didn't. I sat in Jackson Square and listened to a mockingbird running through its catalogue of impressions—catbird, car alarm, chickadee. I was trying to summon images of my own. Did twenty-year-old James Grissom ever meet Tennessee Williams at all? John Guare, who delights in ambiguity, thinks he might have (though he said that, given the amount of material, they must have talked "on that park bench for fourteen years"). John Lahr and Ellen F. Brown don't rule it out, and Brown, who places Williams in Key West and New York around the early fall of 1982, can't say for sure where the playwright was for about two weeks in mid-September.

At Books & Books in Florida, Grissom told his audience that "I am Tennessee Williams material," referring to his post-flight dishabille. During our interview, Grissom complained that the constant demands that he show proof were tiring. "All the burden has been put on me to kind of dance and pull things out. And, you know, it's like Blanche pulling things out of her trunk. And—I'm hurt by it," he said. In "Streetcar," Blanche keeps all her papers and costume jewelry in a trunk; her brother-in-law Stanley is rough with her tinsel finery because at first he mistakes it for treasure. But I didn't see Blanche in Jackson Square, or Tennessee Williams, either. Instead, I thought of the young Jimmy Grissom, the boy who sent short stories to his theatrical idol, looking for advice. Where were all the books and stories and plays that he came to New York to write? He was going to do so much. ♦

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

COMIC EFFECT

How the Marvel Cinematic Universe swallowed Hollywood.

BY MICHAEL SCHULMAN

Growing up in Missouri, Christopher Yost had boxes of Marvel comic books, which his mother bought at the grocery store. None of his friends read Marvel; it was his own private world, a "sprawling story where all these characters lived in this universe together," he recalled. Wolverine could team up with Captain America; Doctor Doom could fight the Red Skull. Unlike the DC comics, whose heroes (Superman, Batman) towered like gods, Marvel's were relatably human, especially Peter Parker, a.k.a. Spider-Man. "He's got money problems and girl problems, and his aunt May is always sick," Yost said. "Every time you think he's going to live this big, glamorous superhero life, it's not that way. He's a grounded, down-to-earth dude. The Marvel characters always seem to have personal problems."

By 2001, Yost, then twenty-seven, was getting an M.F.A. in film business in Los Angeles, but he wanted to be a writer; he had written an unproduced screenplay about an alien invasion. He heard that Marvel had a new West Coast outpost and cold-called for an interview. The studio shared a small office with a company that made kites. There were six employees. One of them, a guy in a ball cap who was also in his late twenties, sat Yost down for what turned into a "comic-book trivia-off." The interviewer, whose name was Kevin Feige, asked, "What issue does Spider-Man get his black costume in?"

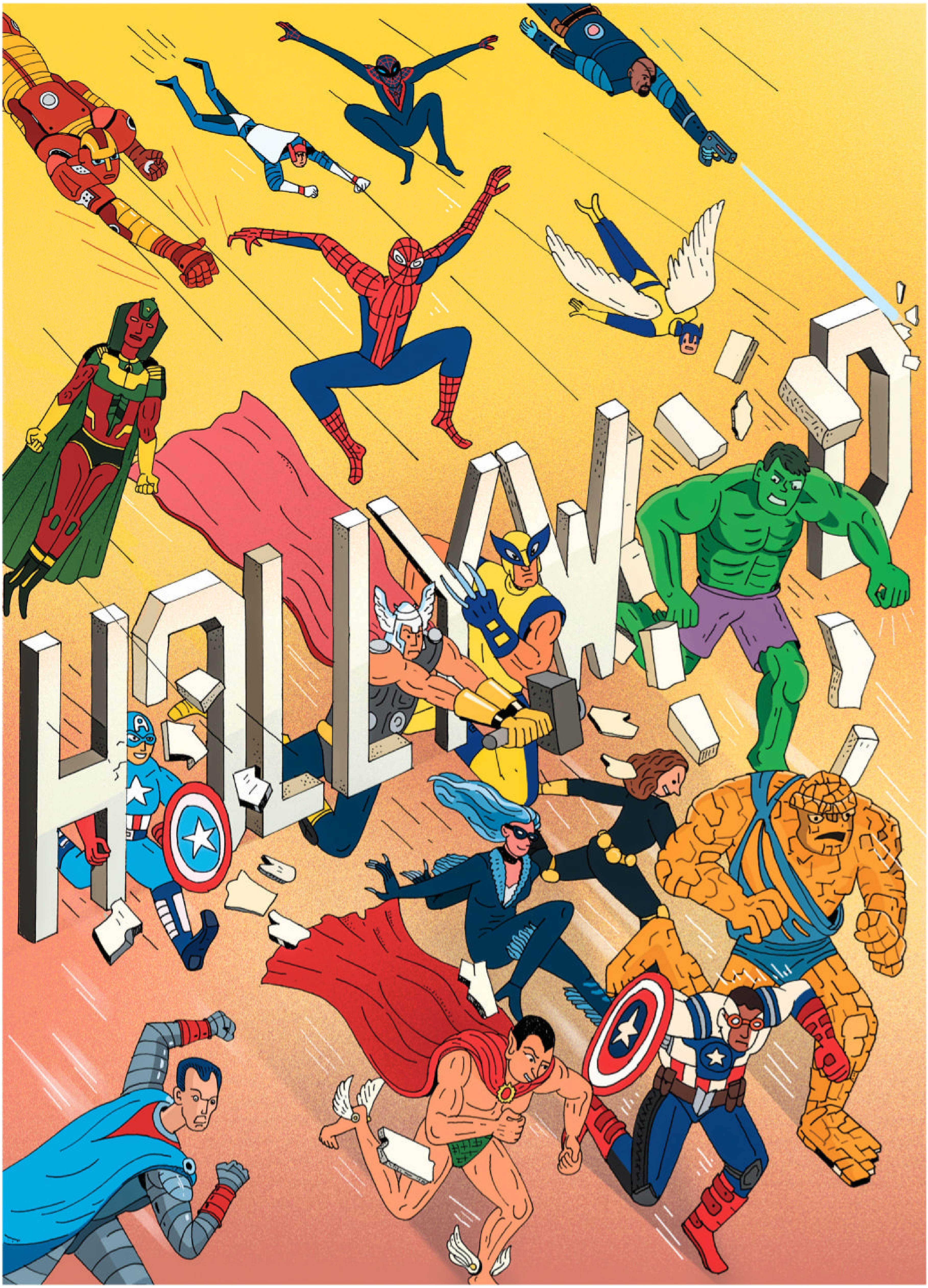
"Oh, that's a trick question," Yost said. (The black suit first appeared in *The Amazing Spider-Man* No. 252, but its origins weren't revealed until the crossover series *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars.*) He landed a summer internship, working from a desk belonging to Stan Lee, Marvel's legendary former editor-in-chief, who rarely came in. The company, which had filed for bankruptcy a few years earlier, had set up the L.A. branch to license Marvel characters to Hollywood; Yost's job was to dig through the vast library of characters and help package them for studios, "basically try to drum up interest." He and Feige had long bull sessions about Namor, a sea-dwelling mutant. On the last day of his internship, Yost left the executives a sci-fi sample script, and he got a job writing for the animated series "X-Men: Evolution."

Cut to 2010. Yost, having built up his résumé on cartoons, was asked to join a writing lab at Marvel Studios, which was making its own live-action features, with astonishing success. The previous year, after Marvel's first film, "Iron Man," earned more than five hundred million dollars, Disney had acquired the studio for four billion dollars. It now occupied a sprawling campus in Manhattan Beach, with its own soundstages. "Imagine an office building stapled to a hangar of an airport," Yost said. Feige was now the studio's president. He would bound from one conference room to another, as teams planned the next steps of what would become known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or the M.C.U. Yost said, "The machine had started up."

Yost was one of four writers who worked developing various characters, some of whom would eventually join the M.C.U. The first Thor film was under way, and Yost was asked to take a shot at a troublesome scene. Soon, he was sitting in front of the director, Kenneth Branagh, who had shaped the movie as a Shakespearean saga that pitted father against son and brother against brother—in space. Yost got in a few uncredited scenes. He went on to co-write the sequels "Thor: The Dark World" and "Thor: Ragnarok," as the M.C.U. grew into the dominant force in global entertainment, pulling all of Hollywood into its orbit. "There's a lot of pressure on Marvel," Yost told me. "Everybody's kind of waiting for them to mess up. But, at the end of the day, we're really just trying to make the movies that we ourselves would like to watch."

Whether you have spent the past decade and a half avoiding Marvel movies like scabies or are in so deep that you can expound on the Sokovia Accords, it is impossible to escape the films' intergalactic reach. Collectively, the M.C.U. movies—the thirty-second, "Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3," opened in May—have grossed more than twenty-nine billion dollars, making the franchise the most successful in entertainment history. The deluge of content extends to TV series and specials, with an international fan base that scours every teaser and corporate shakeup for clues about what's coming next. As in the comics, the M.C.U.'s chief innovation is a shared fictional canvas, where Spider-Man can call on Doctor Strange, and Iron Man can battle Thor's wily brother. Hollywood has always had sequels, but the M.C.U. is a web of interconnecting plots: new characters are introduced, either in their own movies or as side players in someone else's, then collide in climactic Avengers films. In the seventies, "Jaws" and "Star Wars" gave Hollywood a new model for making money: the endlessly promoted summer blockbuster. The M.C.U. multiplied the formula, so that each blockbuster begets another. David Crow, a senior editor for the Web site Den of Geek, calls it a "roadmap for a product that never ends."

Twenty years ago, few people would have bet that a struggling comic-book company would turn a bunch of second-string superheroes into movie icons—much less swallow the film industry whole. Yet the Marvel phenomenon has yanked Hollywood into a franchise-drunk new era, in which intellectual property, more than star power or directorial vision, drives what gets made, with studios scrambling to cobble together their own fictional universes. The shift has come at a perilous time for moviegoing. Audiences, especially since the pandemic, are seeing fewer films in the theatre and streaming more from home, forcing studios to lean on I.P.-driven tentpoles like "The Super



Robert Redford and Glenn Close now star in films whose plots can come down to "Keep glowy thing away from bad guy."

ILLUSTRATION BY MAXIM USIK

Mario Bros. Movie.” Kevin Goetz, the founder of Screen Engine, which studies audience behavior, pointed to Marvel’s sense of “elevated fun” to explain why it gets people to the theatre: “They’re carnival rides, and they’re hefty carnival rides.”

Marvel’s success, he added, has “sucked the air out of” more human-scaled entertainments. Whole species of movies—adult dramas, rom-coms—have become endangered, since audiences are happy to wait and stream “Tár” or “Book Club: The Next Chapter,” or to get their grownup kicks from such series as “Succession” or “The White Lotus.” Yet even prestige television has become overrun with Marvel, “Star Wars,” and “The Lord of the Rings” series, which use the small screen to map out new corners of their trademarked galaxies. Hollywood writers, who are currently striking over the constricted economics of streaming, also complain of the constricted imaginations of TV executives: instead of searching for the next “Mad Men,” they’re hunting for Batman spinoffs.

Wall st
Broadway

Marvel’s fanciful house style has rubbed off even on Oscar winners. This year’s Best Picture, “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” had a Marvel-ish meld of walloping action, goofy humor, and multiverse mythology; it could have easily functioned as the origin story for a new Avenger. Marvel, meanwhile, has colonized nearly every other genre. “WandaVision” was a pastiche of classic sitcoms; “She-Hulk: Attorney at Law” was a feminist legal comedy. Detractors see the brand’s something-for-everyone approach as nefarious. An executive at a rival studio, who called the M.C.U. “the Death of All Cinema,” told me that the dominance of Marvel movies “has served to accelerate the squeezing out of the mid-range movie.” His studio’s comedies had been struggling at the box office, and he groused, “If people want a comedy, they’re going to go see ‘Thor’ or ‘Ant-Man’ as their comedy now.”

In some ways, Marvel harks back to the old studio system, in which Paramount and Warner Bros. kept stables of stars under seven-year contracts and M-G-M’s Freed Unit cranked out movie musicals on an assembly line. Samuel L. Jackson, who plays the Marvel spy Nick Fury, signed a nine-picture deal with the company in 2009, and this summer will lead his own Disney+ series, “Secret Invasion.” The M.C.U. roster includes seasoned icons (Robert Redford, Glenn Close), mid-career stars (Scarlett Johansson, Chris Pratt), and breakout talents (Florence Pugh, Michael B. Jordan). It may be easier to count the conscientious objectors who haven’t gone Marvel, among them Timothée Chalamet, who has said that Leonardo DiCaprio once advised him, “No hard drugs and no superhero movies.” (This was after Chalamet auditioned for Spider-Man.)

Comic-book films have attracted top stars as far back as “Superman” (Marlon Brando, 1978) and “Batman” (Jack Nicholson, 1989), but the M.C.U., by design, can tie up an actor for years. Benedict Cumberbatch went from playing Hamlet to invoking “the grand calculus of the multiverse” as Doctor Strange. Portraying a Marvel character often means not just headlining movies but also filming cameos and crossovers, to the point that even the actor gets confused. Gwyneth Paltrow, who plays Iron Man’s paramour, Pepper Potts, had no idea that she appeared in “Spider-Man: Homecoming,” until the Marvel director Jon Favreau mentioned it to her on his cooking show.

It can be dispiriting to see so much acting talent sucked into the quantum realm of the M.C.U., presumably for a tidy sum, but the paychecks alone don’t explain Marvel’s hold over stars. “At some point, you want to be relevant,” an agent who represents several M.C.U. actors said. “Success is the best drug.” This year, Angela Bassett became the first actor to be nominated for an Oscar for a Marvel role, in “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever.” “Well, it’s so modern,” she told me in February. “We try and stay current, and they’ve got a winning formula.” Entire generations now know Anthony Hopkins not as Hannibal Lecter but as Thor’s dad, King Odin of Asgard. “They put me in armor; they shoved a beard on me,” he told me. “Sit on the throne, shout a bit. If you’re sitting in front of a green screen, it’s pointless acting it.”

The result is a lot of hand-wringing over “the death of the movie star.” In an I.P.-driven ecosystem, individual stars no longer attract audiences to theatres the way they used to, with a handful of exceptions (Tom Cruise, Julia Roberts). You go to a Marvel movie to see Captain America, not Chris Evans. “It’s actually surprising to me how almost none of them have careers outside of the Marvel universe,” another agent said. “The movies don’t work. Look at all the ones Robert Downey, Jr., has tried to do. Look at Tom Holland. It’s been bomb after bomb after bomb.”

Marvel has similarly gobbled up screenwriters, special-effects artists, and workers from nearly every other profession in Hollywood—including directors, who are often snatched from other genres. Taika Waititi made the vampire mockumentary “What We Do in the Shadows” before getting placed in charge of Thor. Chloé Zhao went from moody, micro-budget Westerns to Marvel’s moody, macro-budget “Eternals.” Career paths that once led to Oscars now lead inexorably to the some-assembly-required world-building of the M.C.U. An agent who works with screenwriters complained, “I worry for the film industry, because, if you’re Chloé Zhao and you want to tell a story on a big canvas, mostly you’re limited to trying to tell it on a canvas of a big superhero.” He added, “It’s a pair of golden handcuffs.”

Dissenters have been loud. In 2019, Martin Scorsese pronounced Marvel movies “not cinema,” earning the undying enmity of comics fans. Last year, Quentin Tarantino lamented Marvel’s “choke hold” on Hollywood and said, “You have to be a hired hand to do those things.” When I mentioned this comment to Joe and Anthony Russo, brothers who directed four Marvel movies, including the highest grossing, “Avengers: Endgame,” Anthony said, “I don’t know if Quentin feels like he was born to make a Marvel movie, which is maybe why he would feel like a hired hand doing it. It depends on your relationship to the source material.” Joe added, “What fulfills us the most is building a sense of community around our work.” People involved in Marvel projects often talk about “playing in the sandbox,” which is another way of saying that the brand takes precedence over any individual voice—except that of Feige, the affable face of the franchise.

Industry people like to speculate about

"Marvel fatigue," which is mostly wishful thinking—though a recent series of creative missteps and corporate machinations have rivals salivating. As much as competitors gripe about Marvel, though, they've spent the past decade trying to emulate it. Marvel's nemesis, DC Studios, which is owned by Warner Bros., has a hit-or-miss record, with often gritty, self-serious movies that lack Marvel's zip and quality control. Last year, Warner Bros. brought in James Gunn (who directed Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy trilogy) and Peter Safran to reboot DC's film universe, presumably in the image of the M.C.U. Sony, which shares the Spider-Man franchise with Marvel, is building out its Spider-verse with characters like Venom. In 2017, Universal announced its own Dark Universe, based on its classic monsters, such as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Russell Crowe) and the Invisible Man (Johnny Depp). After the first installment—"The Mummy," starring Tom Cruise—disappointed, the plan was scrapped.

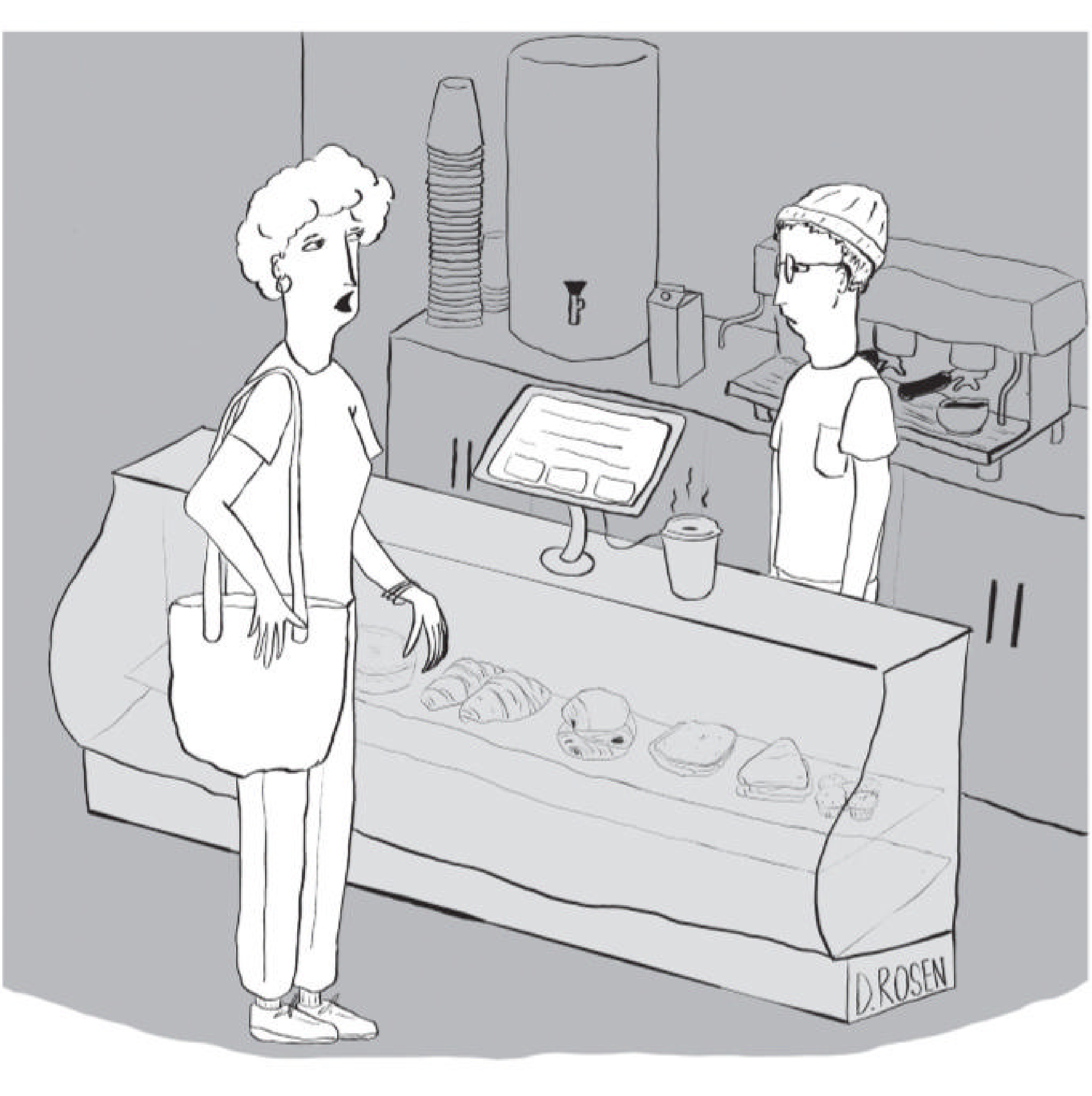
The lesson: you can't wish a universe into existence, Genesis style. Marvel, which had a preëxisting tangle of comic-book plots to draw on, rolled out its movies methodically, gaining the audience's trust. Goetz, the audience analyst, compared it to Apple: "The Marvel folks have an emotional handshake with their consumers." Just as you can live your tech life within the frictionless confines of MacBooks and iPads, it's possible to live your entire entertainment life in the Marvel universe, which pumps out a new series or movie every few weeks. Because the M.C.U. rewards expertise, it can baffle the casual viewer. If you saw "Wakanda Forever" and wondered what the hell Julia Louis-Dreyfus was doing in it, you likely missed her character's début, in the Disney+ series "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier." But a critical mass is on board. "The expression 'preach to the choir' often implies a certain niche-ness," Christopher Markus, one of the writers of "Endgame," said. "There was a very gratifying, unduplicatable sense with that movie that the choir was nearly global."

The M.C.U. opens, improbably, on an arid Afghan landscape. A blast of AC/DC cues a Humvee containing Tony Stark, the playboy arms industrialist portrayed by Robert Downey, Jr. Within the first ten minutes of "Iron Man," released in May, 2008, Tony gambles, defends the military-industrial complex, and beds a journalist. The M.C.U. is an augmented reality—a world resembling our own, overlaid by superheroes—but the adult tone of "Iron Man," with its undercurrents of Bush-era geopolitics, didn't last. "It's very different from what Marvel is now," the "Thor" screenwriter Zack Stentz observed. "It's, like, ten degrees off of reality, rather than a talking raccoon with machine guns and magic and parallel universes."

In other ways, "Iron Man" set a clear course for the franchise, with bursts of action punctuated by quippy, self-referential humor propelled by Downey's motormouthed, largely improvised performance, reminiscent of a Vegas lounge act. In a post-credits scene, Samuel L. Jackson, as Nick Fury, shows up to tell Tony, "Mr. Stark, you've become part of a bigger universe." "The Incredible Hulk," released the following month, ends with Tony appearing at a bar to drop a hint about "putting a team together." The model was in place: each movie would contain the germ of the next, and end by teasing a tantalizing mystery or crossover.

Thirty-odd films later, Marvel's critics (and even some fans) groan at the formula. There's the climactic C.G.I. slugfest, often pitting a good iron man against a bad iron man, or a good dragon against a bad dragon, or a good witch against a bad witch. There's the self-referential shtick, the interchangeable villains. There are presumed-dead characters who reappear, as on a soap opera. Most plots boil down to "Keep glowy thing away from bad guy," and the stakes are nothing less than the fate of the world, which come to feel like no stakes at all.

Within that framework, however, the M.C.U. allows for a range of stylistic variation. Branagh's Shakespearean "Thor" gave way to Waititi's zany sequels, rife with dick jokes and heavy metal. Jon Watts modelled his Spider-Man films on John Hughes's teen dramas. For "Captain America: Winter Soldier," the Russo brothers drew on Watergate-era thrillers such as "Three Days of the Condor." And Ryan Coogler's "Black Panther" movies, which are in a class of their own, are



"Which button lets me quickly clear the screen after I don't leave a tip?"

THE THREE GRACES

Who could care about the probability of love when brought, like us, to this
world under endless darkness? A great mountain engulfed

by a greater ocean, we formed, ever so slowly, from tectonic plates
colliding, one mounting another, riding the way time rode

sunlight and moonlight across the icy surface of the water.
We learned, with time, to view and invent this life from the depths

where beasts, now extinct, bellowed and belted their brutal songs.
All that remains of them, and of that time, are the bones we buried, burnished

beneath beds of sandstone and limestone, made unknown and then known
when the waves and the darkness dried up. The wind whittled us

like a restless sculptor pacing around a slab of marble, imitating
God with a hammer and chisel. In the Garden of the Gods, we endured

the erotics of erosion. Loss. Change. What we couldn’t change
and what we lost to time made us more fully ourselves

steeped in Afrofuturism and postcolonial politics.

You might picture arriving for your first day of work on a Marvel movie and being handed a leather-bound bible of character mythology. Instead, directors who are in the running for their first Marvel job are given a fifteen-or-so-page “discussion document,” distilled from corporate brainstorming retreats. Landing the job requires not slavish adherence to the document but a nifty approach to executing it. The movies are shot all over the world but edited in Burbank, on the same lot as Feige’s office. Each film’s creative team meets multiple times a week with Marvel’s upper management—until recently, a group known as the Trio, consisting of Feige, Louis D’Esposito, and Victoria Alonso. Filmmakers also receive notes from the Parliament, a group of senior creative executives who are each assigned to individual projects but review them all as a committee.

All this corporate machinery may sound oppressive, but Marvel collaborators tend to describe their experiences as surprisingly free-form and hands-off. One editor referred to Marvel’s oversight as a “pinkie on the steering wheel.” “There wasn’t anything dictated at all,” Joe Johnston, who directed the first Captain America film, told me. Erik Sommers, who co-wrote the Spider-Man trilogy, recalled that Marvel assistants had put together a document that explained the difference between a “universe” and a “dimension.” But otherwise, he said, “it’s not a giant diagram of preëxisting dots that need to be connected in a certain order.”

A few directors—Patty Jenkins, Edgar Wright—have quit Marvel projects, after battling for creative control. “The only times we’d run into problems is if we got a filmmaker who said, ‘This is what I want to do,’ and then showed up and wanted to do something completely different,” a former Marvel executive told me. “So then you hear people saying, ‘Kevin Feige came in, and he took over the process!’ But, if you know what the game plan is, you end up having a ton of creative freedom at Marvel, because we’re working inside the box.” Scorsese would shudder.

Filmmakers are often left in the dark about larger plans for the M.C.U. In Johnston’s film, Captain America’s best friend, Bucky, played by Sebastian Stan, falls off a mountain. He returns in later movies as the Winter Soldier, a major character, but, when Johnston directed the dramatic death scene, he had no knowledge of the character’s fate. “I assumed that was the end of Bucky,” he told me. When Sommers was working on “Spider-Man: Far from Home,” he and his writing partner, Chris McKenna, didn’t know what would happen in “Endgame”—which preceded “Far from Home” in M.C.U. chronology—except for the death of Tony Stark, which was referred to internally by the code name The Wedding.

Feige (who declined to be interviewed) has a reputation as an all-knowing Oz, but collaborators describe him as a comic-book savant who pops in and offers story fixes culled from his encyclopedic Marvel knowledge and delivered with a gee-whiz fanboy enthusiasm. “Anytime somebody pitches him something, he imagines himself in a theatre with a tub of popcorn,” Yost told me. A spitball session might result in tectonic maneuvering. When the Russos pushed to base the third Captain America movie on the *Civil War* comics—a crossover series involving a toybox’s worth of heroes—Feige worked for months to get the actors and the I.P. aligned. Anthony Russo recalled, “He opened up the door one day and poked

and full of ourselves. We fooled around and made a fool of God.
We, in our faulted and faultless glamour, became a brand-new home

for the bighorn sheep and lions, the canyon wrens and white-throated swifts
swinging low below a cloudless sky. We drank the sky and threw up

acres of wild prairie grass, piñon juniper, and ponderosa pine
from the remains of ancestral ranges and sand dunes. Maybe this was love

after all. We remained. We reinvented ourselves. We let the weaker parts of us go
and decided, despite our egos and the tests of time, to test time and show

how miraculous it is to exist. To live beyond survival. To be alive
twice and thrice, and countless times to find one with and within another.

What are the chances of that? One in a thousand. One in a million. One in love
proves and is living proof that anything and everything is probable

through seasons counting on rain to come down like a downpour of stars.
Seasons of Never This Again. Seasons of This Could Last Forever.

—Paul Tran

his head in and said, ‘War is coming!’ ” But Feige’s zeal belies a cannier managerial skill. “He’s really good at getting what he wants, but at the same time making everybody feel like they got what they wanted,” the former executive said.

That particular superpower likely explains why M.C.U. filmmakers talk about their projects so personally, as if unloading to a shrink. When Jon Watts was hired to direct his first Spider-Man movie, he was best known for directing music videos and the Sundance thriller “Cop Car.” For “Spider-Man: Homecoming,” he had Peter Parker become Tony Stark’s anxious acolyte. “It’s about a kid who gets a huge opportunity and is really nervous that he’s going to screw it up,” Watts said. “That was me, I’m sure, externalizing my actual apprehension and nerves about making this jump from a really small independent movie to a two-hundred-million-dollar Marvel movie.”

It’s a cliché that superheroes are our modern Zeuses and Aphrodites, but Marvel movies tend to refract the preoccupations of a more earthbound subspecies: the middle-aged Hollywood male. The writers Ashley Miller and Zack Stentz met in the nineties, arguing over “Star Trek” in an online chat room, and worked together on the first Thor movie. Reflecting on Thor’s troubled relationship with his father, Stentz said, “I had an emotionally distant father, who often seemed impossible to win the approval of.” Miller keyed into Thor’s conflict with his brother Loki, the god of mischief. Six years after the movie, Miller’s therapist helped him realize that he’d been drawing on his “quietly contentious relationship” with his older brother.

M.C.U. movies are often metaphors for themselves. In “The Avengers,” the tense collaboration among superheroes with complementary powers and sizable egos resembles nothing so much as Hollywood filmmaking, with writers, directors, and producers wrangling for control. In “Captain America: Civil War,” the Avengers are divided over the issue of government oversight, a handy analogy for creativity under corporate supervision. As the M.C.U. goes on, the heroes become celebrities in their fictional world—in “Ragnarok,” a group of fangirls asks Thor for a selfie—just as they became celebrities in ours. “You’re watching them go through a version of the stresses you go through, but they’re exaggerated,” Christopher Markus said. “And you know almost all of them would rather be home. This goes back to Stan Lee, back to the comics—they had heroism largely thrust upon them by circumstance.”

In superhero tales, origin stories are crucial. The M.C.U. has several. The first begins in 1939, when the pulp-magazine publisher Martin Goodman launched Timely Comics, in Manhattan. Its first issue, *Marvel Comics* No. 1, featured stories of the Human Torch and Namor the Sub-Mariner. In issue No. 7, a policewoman mentioned the Torch to Namor, revealing that the characters occupied the same fictional world. Not long afterward, Stanley Lieber, a young cousin of Goodman’s wife, joined Timely as an errand boy. He soon began writing the stories, under the pen name Stan Lee.

Lee was still an ocarina-playing teenager when he became Timely’s editor-in-chief, overseeing the company’s wartime golden age. Its breakout hero, Captain America, punched out Hitler and gained a wide following among G.I.s overseas. Unlike DC Comics, whose characters lived in Metropolis or in Gotham City, Marvel heroes lived among us; Namor scaled the Empire State Building, where Timely had offices on the fourteenth floor. Once the war ended, the superhero craze waned, and Congress scapegoated comic books for causing juvenile delinquency. In 1957, Lee had to lay off his entire staff.

Origin Story No. 2: a resurrection. In 1961, Goodman was playing golf with DC's publisher and learned that its heroes would soon appear together in *The Justice League of America*. Goodman told Lee to copy the supergroup concept, and Lee and the artist Jack Kirby issued *Fantastic Four* No. 1. During its "silver age," the renamed Marvel Comics rolled out a slew of new characters—Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, Iron Man—becoming the hip underdog to DC. By 1965, circulation had tripled, to thirty-five million copies a year. Fellini was a fan. So were beatniks and college kids. As Sean Howe writes in "Marvel Comics: The Untold Story," "For twelve cents an issue, Marvel Comics delivered fascinatingly dysfunctional protagonists, literary flourishes, and eye-popping images to little kids, Ivy Leaguers, and hippies alike." The Hulk had rage issues; the X-Men fought anti-mutant discrimination. Marvel's kooky, neurotic cast overlapped in ways that grew Talmudic in complexity, and fans were eager to flaunt their arcane knowledge.

For a time, Lee oversaw the continuity of this ever-expanding universe, but his eye roamed to Hollywood, where he decamped in an attempt to bring Marvel to the screen. He had luck in television, with Saturday-morning cartoons and the live-action series "The Incredible Hulk," which ran from 1977 to 1982. (CBS dropped a planned Human Torch show, worried that it would inspire kids to set themselves on fire.) But, even as the Superman movies proved that superheroes could work on the big screen, Marvel projects stalled. Cannon Pictures tied up the rights to Spider-Man. In the early eighties, there was buzz about Tom Selleck playing Doctor Strange. Nothing materialized. In 1986, Universal released the first movie based on a Marvel property, "Howard the Duck," about a wisecracking alien duck who falls to Earth. It bombed.

Origin Story No. 3: another resurrection. In 1989, the billionaire Ron Perelman, notorious for his hostile takeover of Revlon, scooped up Marvel for $82.5 million, calling it a "mini-Disney in terms of intellectual property." But he considered movies too risky. Instead, he padded out the entity, renamed Marvel Entertainment Group, with trading-card and sticker acquisitions. By the mid-nineties, Marvel's famed "bullpen" of comic-book writers and artists had lost many of its star talents, and the bulk of the staff was laid off. Incensed by the declining quality, fans boycotted. Compounding Marvel's financial woes, a Major League Baseball strike tanked the trading-card business. By the fourth quarter of 1996, Marvel was posting losses of four hundred million dollars. The stock price plummeted. Perelman filed for Chapter 11. Another billionaire, Carl Icahn, led a group of insurgent bondholders in an attempted takeover. During an agonizing year and a half in Delaware's bankruptcy court, the two men battled for control of Marvel like Green Goblin versus the Vulture.

Neither won. The surprise victor was a reclusive Israeli entrepreneur named Isaac (Ike) Perlmutter, whose company Toy Biz had an exclusive licensing deal with Marvel. Perlmutter had served in the Israeli military and kept a gun in his briefcase, which he would open conspicuously during negotiations. People he met in the U.S. mistakenly assumed that he had fought in the Six-Day War; this was repeated so often that even his close associates believed it. Perlmutter had come to America in his twenties and begun his career by standing at the gates of Jewish cemeteries in Brooklyn and charging mourners to have him deliver the Kaddish. He made millions buying up cheap surplus goods and distressed retailers, but his life style remained parsimonious to the point of eccentricity. He and his wife spent much of their time at a condo in Palm Beach, where they are said to still split a hot dog at Costco every Saturday. (His estimated worth: $3.9 billion.)

In the bankruptcy war between Perelman and Icahn, Perlmutter played—and enraged—both sides. When Icahn threatened to "pull down Toy Biz and bury you and Marvel with me," Perlmutter faxed back four pages from the Book of Judges. (Samson: "Let me die with the Philistines!") In 1998, the court approved Perlmutter's restructuring plan, a leveraged buyout that would merge Marvel and Toy Biz. Like the pair of corporate raiders he'd bested, Perlmutter could hardly tell Iron Man from the Silver Surfer. But his business partner, Avi Arad, was a true believer. Arad, a fellow-Israeli who wore Harley-Davidson jackets, had made his name as a toy designer; his portfolio included a disappearing-ink gun and a doll that peed. Through Toy Biz, he had established himself as Marvel's liaison to Hollywood, horning in on Stan Lee's turf. During the bankruptcy proceedings, Arad gave an impassioned speech to the bankers to dissuade them from taking a deal from Icahn: "I feel certain that Spider-Man alone is worth a billion dollars. But now, at this crazy hour, at this juncture, you're going to take three hundred and eighty million—whatever it is from Carl Icahn—for the whole thing? *One* thing is worth a billion! We have the X-Men. We have the Fantastic Four. They all can be movies."

Now that Marvel was back from near-death and in need of cash, Arad set up an office in L.A. to license characters. In a short time, he succeeded where Lee had failed. He'd already sold the X-Men to Fox, which released its first X-Men film in 2000. He hired Feige, a young associate producer on the movie, to work for Marvel full time. The rights to Spider-Man, which had been scattered among six different entities, were miraculously regrouped and sold for ten million dollars per picture to Sony, which released the first Tobey Maguire film in 2002; it grossed more than eight hundred million dollars worldwide. Marvel was, at long last, in the moviemaking business. But, by parcelling its I.P. to studios all over town, the company had sacrificed an essential part of its DNA: its heroes couldn't intermingle onscreen.

Consider another origin story, hitherto ignored. One late-summer weekend in 2003, a talent-agency executive named David Maisel was in his sweatpants, in the loft of his L.A. apartment. He had spent two years at the Endeavor agency, and he was contemplating his next move. But he didn't want to remain an agent—he wanted to run a studio. "That's when I thought, Hey, if I can get a movie I can believe in, and every movie after that one is a sequel or a quasi-sequel—the same characters show up—then it can go on forever," he told me. "Because it's not thirty new movies. It's one movie and twenty-nine sequels. What we call a universe." He eyed the Marvel comics on his bookshelves. This, Maisel claims, was the birth of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Maisel, a slender and soft-spoken man, was telling me this story in the spot where the eureka moment took place. I had met him at his nearby office, a second apartment, festooned with Marvel posters, action figures, and director's chairs. He wore cargo pants and a Silver Surfer hoodie. Without him, he said plainly, "the M.C.U. would never exist. It's like a Thanos snap." Near a plastic Thor hammer was a framed *Times* article from 2007, detailing Maisel's plans for Marvel to release "10 self-financed films in the next five years." Feige, Maisel noted, was not even mentioned. "Most people right now think Kevin started the studio," he said. "They don't know me at all."

"David's been sort of written out of the history of the studio, which I really think is weird," John Turitzin, who until recently was Marvel Entertainment's chief counsel, told me. "It was his brainchild." Although Maisel came up alongside such Hollywood wheeler-dealers as Bryan Lourd, he has a gentle, almost childlike air. He is single and unextravagant, describing himself as "very influenced by Buddhist philosophy and simplicity." He had spent the previous three years living with his elderly mother, who died eight weeks before we met. But he's not without ego. "He thinks that he's the smartest guy in the room all the time—just ask him," a Marvel alumnus told me. "Because he's really smart and myopic, he doesn't read the room very well." If Maisel were a Marvel character, he'd be a mysterious sorcerer in a cave, whispering to all who entered that he created the solar system.

Maisel grew up in Saratoga Springs, the son of a dentist and a Czechoslovakian-born housewife. "Marvel comics, and especially Iron Man, were my favorite things," he recalled, sitting on a sofa with Iron Man throw pillows, his feet on a Spider-Man rug. Tony Stark had a cool suit and a captain-of-industry swagger, but "he had a frail heart." In the eighties, Maisel tried to rally his classmates at Harvard Business School to "go buy Marvel," but the idea didn't get further than a brainstorm over beers. He worked for consulting firms, but after his sister died, of lupus, he realized that "life is precious" and moved to Hollywood, where he got a job with the superagent Michael Ovitz, the co-founder of C.A.A. "He needed his token Harvard M.B.A. that he could bring with him to Warren Beatty's house," Maisel said. When Ovitz became the president of Disney—a tumultuous sixteen-month tenure—Maisel followed him and did strategic planning at ABC, which was owned by Disney and run by Bob Iger. "I learned, at Disney, the power of franchises," Maisel recalled. He joined Endeavor at the beckoning of the firm's partners Ari Emanuel and Patrick Whitesell. In Hollywood, Maisel was living in the Tony Stark fast lane (he and Leonardo DiCaprio have taken their moms out together for Mother's Day) when he determined that Marvel should finance its own intertwining movies. The problem was that he didn't work at Marvel. Maisel flew to Palm Beach to pitch Perlmutter over lunch at Mar-a-Lago. (Donald Trump, a friend of Perlmutter, who later became one of his major political donors, came by to say hello. "I don't remember what Trump said at the time, but it was nothing impressive," Maisel recalled.) Perlmutter was skeptical; he saw movies primarily as an engine to sell merchandise. But that hadn't always worked out. In 2000, Fox moved up the release date for "X-Men" by six months, leaving Marvel without action figures in stores. The former Marvel executive I spoke to recalled, "David had a sense that, if Marvel could own its own movies and control its destiny, it would change the course of cinema history."

Perlmutter agreed to let Maisel try, appointing him president of Marvel Studios. But there were hurdles. When Maisel pitched the board of directors, they said no—or, at least, not as long as there was any financial risk. Maisel asked them to halt movie licensing for six months while he put together the money. Turitzin recalled that, at a meeting with Standard & Poor's, to get a credit rating on the financing, "David made a comment about how Marvel was a compelling brand that people wanted to see on the screen, and the woman who was running the meeting for S. & P. spontaneously

LOST
AND
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PHYSICAL THE

"Can you send me a detailed list of knee exercises I could do at home but won't because I have no discipline?"

• •

guffawed, because the idea seemed like such hubris." Marvel would have to compete not only with DC's Superman and Batman but also with its own best-known heroes, Spider-Man and the X-Men, which were licensed to other studios. "If I had gone there even eight months later, it would have been too late, because they were about to license Captain America and Thor," Maisel said.

Like Nick Fury assembling the Avengers, Maisel lassoed back whichever characters he could. He recovered Black Widow from Lionsgate. He struck a deal that let Universal keep the right to distribute a Hulk movie but had a loophole allowing Marvel to use the Hulk as a secondary character. (This is why, even though the Hulk is all over the M.C.U., Marvel has never released a "Hulk 2.") New Line, with pressure from Avi Arad, reverted its rights to Iron Man, hardly an A-list hero. To prove the viability of its characters, Marvel released direct-to-DVD animated Avengers movies. In the pre-recession boom times, Maisel secured five hundred and twenty-five million dollars—enough for four movies—in risk-free financing through Merrill Lynch. The collateral was the film rights to the characters, which, if the movies failed, would presumably be worthless anyway. "It was like a free loan," Maisel said. "You go to a casino and get to keep the winnings. You don't have to worry if you lose. The board had really no choice but to approve me making the new Marvel Studios." Marvel convened focus groups of children, who were shown the available superheroes and asked which one they'd most want as a toy. The answer, surprisingly, was Iron Man.

At the Marvel Studios offices, now above a Mercedes-Benz dealership in Beverly Hills, a team of mostly Gen X men who had grown up on Marvel comics—including Feige and Avi Arad's son, Ari—planned the first slate of movies, which would introduce the heroes one by one, and then unite them in "The Avengers." (Anyone bemoaning Gen X's supposed lack of cultural influence should look to the M.C.U.) "There was this general feeling of, like, Holy shit, they're letting us do it," the screenwriter Zak Penn recalled. Feige was a film-school graduate from New Jersey with a storage unit full of movie merch. "Kevin was the kind of guy," the former executive recalled, "where you would find yourself at a Toys R Us for the release of the 'Phantom Menace' toys." Maisel would debate Feige—whom he described as "Avi's lackey" at that point—until 3 A.M. over, say, who would win in a fight between the Hulk and Thor. (Maisel leaned Thor: "Strength doesn't always win.") On a retreat in Palm Springs, Feige and a small group mapped out "Phase One" of the movies on whiteboards and sticky notes, deciding that it would revolve around the Tesseract, a glowing, all-powerful cube that looks like a design object from the Sharper Image.

Like the Avengers, the group was not immune to squabbling. Avi Arad, several people told me, was excited about the self-producing plan but then turned against it; he worried that they were taking on too much. Perlmutter was also waffling. "Ike wanted to cancel the whole thing. Avi didn't like it. They realized there was pressure on them to deliver," the former executive recalled. "It's like when a kid is trying to date an older girl. All of a sudden, she says yes—well, now what? 'I don't know how to take her to prom! I don't even have a suit!'"

A power struggle erupted between Maisel and Arad. "Being in a room with the two of them was like being in a room with a divorcing couple," Turitzin recalled. In Maisel's telling, Perlmutter was forced to choose between them, like an Old Testament patriarch. He sided with Maisel. Arad told me that he grew frustrated with how large the company had become and objected to a plan to expand into animated features. "I'm a one-man show. One-man show makes a lot of enemies," he said. As for Maisel—whom he dismissed as an overambitious numbers guy, while ascribing the studio's reinvention to his own salesmanship and connections—he said, "He was brilliant, but the way he deals with people turned out to be a problem, specifically for me." Arad resigned in 2006, and he and his son set up their own production company, which continued to work on Sony's Spider-Man films. Maisel became the chairman of Marvel Studios. He made Feige head of production.

To direct "Iron Man," Marvel hired Jon Favreau, who was best known for the single-dude comedy "Swingers" and the Christmas hit "Elf." The title role came down to Timothy Olyphant and Downey, who was in a career slump after years of drug arrests and rehab. "My board thought I was crazy to put the future of the company in the hands of an addict," Maisel said. "I helped them understand how great he was for the role. We all had confidence that he was clean and would stay clean." The movie, with a budget of a mere hundred and forty million dollars, relied less on spectacle than on Downey's detached playfulness and his screwball-comedy chemistry with Paltrow. When Perlmutter visited the set, the producers had to hide the free snacks and drinks for the crew. Obsessively press-avoidant, he showed up at the première disguised in a hat and a fake mustache.

In early 2009, Maisel met with his former colleague Bob Iger, who had become the C.E.O. of Disney. Without consulting Perlmutter, Maisel suggested that Disney buy the newly ascendant Marvel. Perlmutter was assured that Disney would preserve Marvel's corporate culture, as it had with Pixar, and that he would remain its chief executive. The acquisition was finalized on the last day of the year. Maisel resigned, fifty million dollars richer. "I wanted to leave and live a life—find a wife, which I still haven't done," he told me. He'd installed Feige as the studio's president and figured that the franchise was in good hands, though he seems bewildered by how Feige's contributions have eclipsed his own. "Kevin was a kid who I promoted, and I was his biggest fan," Maisel said. "But Kevin wasn't even in the room where it happened." He's currently planning a new universe of animated musicals based on Greek and Roman myths, starting with Justin Bieber as Cupid.

As we talked, Maisel pointed to a glass globe on his coffee table and asked me to cradle it in my palms for thirty seconds in silence. I obeyed. "How does it make you feel?" he asked. In truth, I felt a bit like Thanos, with the power to destroy worlds, but told him that I felt peaceful and protective. He nodded. Weeks earlier, Maisel had met the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, at the invitation of Robert Thurman, the president of Tibet House U.S. and Uma's father. He had brought an identical orb, which he'd bought at a gallery in upstate New York, and asked the Dalai Lama to hold it. Maisel pitched him an idea: His Holiness could pass the orb to another person, who could pass it to another, until all of humanity could feel its awe. "My globe is now his. It's going to become a piece of art around the world," Maisel beamed. "I feel the same way about Marvel."

The M.C.U. arrived late in Marvel's history, but it was well timed. By the late two-thousands, TV series like "Lost" had primed audiences to follow byzantine serial storytelling. And effects technology had finally caught up with the boundless, physics-defying action of the comics. It was one thing to make Superman fly using wires and a green screen; it was another to have Bruce Banner morph into the Hulk, or Tony Stark zoom around in his mechanized suit without it looking chintzy. With C.G.I., anything the comics had dreamed up was newly filmable.

With Arad and Maisel gone and Perlmutter incognito, Feige became the poster boy for Marvel's meteoric success. But his executive style skewed adolescent. Feige had spent years on the wait list for Disneyland's Club 33, a members-only executive lounge. "When we were purchased by the company, Kevin's big thing was 'Can I get to the top of the Club 33 list now?'" the former executive recalled. Because Feige had to sign off on nearly every creative decision, frustrated executives learned to e-mail him not with questions but with deadlines: "I'm constructing a set at three o'clock, unless you tell me otherwise." At first, Feige declined a company driver, but he was eventually persuaded that his commute from Pacific Palisades to Burbank was better spent reading scripts. His unpretentious style endeared him to the Comic-Con crowd, as an Everyfan who represented all Marvel geeks' dreams of getting the key to the toy chest.

The toy chest still belonged to Perlmutter, who continued to meddle from back East. Since taking over Marvel, he had imposed an obsessive frugality. He would fish paper clips out of the trash. "Instead of buying us actual furniture, he took a truckload of furniture that he had in a warehouse somewhere and shipped it to us," the former executive recalled. "I remember having to unload a semi truck of furniture and opening drawers up and finding old sandwiches." Once, the studio accidentally ordered pens with purple ink; Perlmutter refused to allow a replacement order, so for years Marvel paperwork was done in purple. The stinginess extended to movies. Chris Hemsworth was paid just a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to star in "Thor." Terrence Howard, the highest-paid actor in "Iron Man," was replaced in sequels by Don Cheadle; Perlmutter reportedly said that no one would notice, because Black people all look alike. (Perlmutter denies this.)

To help maintain his grip on the L.A. profit center, Perlmutter established the Marvel Creative Committee, a group of writers, editors, and allies from Marvel's New York-based publishing wing. A High Court of Nerds didn't sound like a bad idea, but the committee became the bane of the movie people. "It was basically a group that existed to tell the studio that they were doing everything wrong," the former executive said, recalling that, on the first day of shooting "The Avengers," the committee sent a twenty-six-page memo suggesting that the entire story be rewritten. "It was destructive madness."

By 2015, the executive said, the feud "was almost like an East Coast–West Coast rap battle." Feige was chafing under Perlmutter's control, and, according to Iger, Perlmutter was "intent on firing" Feige. Iger blocked the ouster and restructured the chain of command, so that Feige would report directly to Disney's studio chairman, Alan Horn. (Perlmutter says that he never tried to fire Feige but worried that Marvel's reliance on him was "unduly risky" and urged Iger to recruit a backup.) The dreaded committee was disbanded, and Perlmutter was sidelined, but by then he had presided over the clearing of Marvel's biggest roadblock: Sony's hold on Spider-Man. For years, the two studios had bickered over the character like separated parents fighting over custody. Sony executives were used to getting screaming calls from Perlmutter about expenditures as small as free drinks at press junkets.

As the M.C.U. grew, Sony had announced a competing Spider-verse, but the studio was getting fan petitions to restore Spider-Man to Marvel, and its 2014 installment, "The Amazing Spider-Man 2," fell flat. Flailing, Sony contemplated a sequel that would send Spider-Man to a land of dinosaurs. Sony's Amy Pascal and Michael Lynton finally flew to Palm Beach to strike a deal with Perlmutter and Feige: Sony would continue to release Spider-Man movies, but Feige would oversee them, and Peter Parker could, at long last, meet his friends in the M.C.U. The deal cut out Avi Arad, who calls it a "betrayal." In an unsubtle nod, the first Spider-Man movie under the new arrangement was subtitled "Homecoming."

As new characters appeared, the M.C.U. grew unwieldy. After Phase One climaxed with "The Avengers," in 2012—the apotheosis of the Marvel style, with the wisecracking heroes fighting off an alien army and then celebrating over shawarma—Phase Two repeated the formula by adding more obscure characters, such as the Guardians of the Galaxy and Ant-Man. Skeptics wondered whether Marvel was scraping the bottom of the superhero barrel, but the movies were hits. Phase Three brought in Doctor Strange and Black Panther, then mashed up the whole sprawling cast in "Avengers: Infinity War," in which the craggy superbaddie Thanos, concerned about galactic overpopulation, wipes out half of all living things with a snap of his fingers. In truth, the M.C.U. was overpopulated and in need of a reset. "Avengers: Endgame" retired Chris Evans's Captain America and killed off Downey's Tony Stark, who had been the franchise's driving personality.

"I'm taking a picture of where the food I ordered twenty minutes ago ought to be."

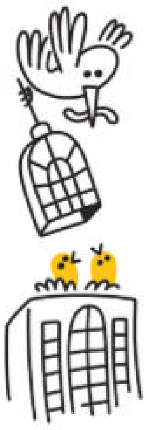
As the comics had done in the sixties and seventies, the studio belatedly diversified its heroes. The 2014 Sony hack had turned up an e-mail from Perlmutter casting doubt on the profitability of female superheroes. (John Turitzin, a longtime Perlmutter ally, told me that Perlmutter had just been "parroting other people" and added, "He has a very good feel for financing, but he knows nothing about the characters.") Loosed from Perlmutter's grip, Marvel released a standalone movie for Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow and added Simu Liu's Shang-Chi. But, without Tony Stark leading the pack, the new phases felt directionless. One potential successor, Black Panther, was eliminated by the death of Chadwick Boseman, in 2020.

Nonetheless, the content spigot opened wider still. In 2021, Phase Four kicked off the "Multiverse Saga," which will unspool across phases at least through 2026. The multiverse may be a philosophical concept—that parallel universes contain infinite possible realities—but it's better understood as an organizing principle for colliding strands of I.P. Disney's purchase of Twentieth Century Fox brought the promise of the X-Men and the Fantastic Four finally joining the M.C.U. At Feige's suggestion, "Spider-Man: No Way Home" used the multiverse idea to bring M.C.U. heroes (Cumberbatch's Doctor Strange) together with characters from Sony's previous iterations of "Spider-Man" (Alfred Molina's Doctor Octopus). The premise was both trippy fan service and blatant corporate synergy. "You have this historic deal between Sony and Marvel, and they want things from each other," the "No Way Home" co-writer Chris McKenna said. "There's going to be cross-pollination of characters, so that both corporations are feeling like they're getting something out of this relationship."

This year has been tumultuous for Marvel. In February, "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania," the first film in Phase Five, opened to a lukewarm box office and some of the worst reviews in Marvel's history. ("Busy, noisy and thoroughly uninspired," Manohla Dargis wrote in the *Times*.) The visual effects were singled out as muddy and generic, adding to a perception that Marvel is spewing out more content than it can handle. A single film may have upward of three thousand effects shots, and Marvel's strategy of tapping directors from sitcoms or Sundance means that the person in charge has little experience handling big action scenes. The past few years have brought reports of burnout and discontent in the VFX industry. Because Marvel, its biggest client, is known for its penny-pinching, VFX firms underbid one another for work, leaving projects understaffed and underfunded. Effects artists have been seen crying at their desks during eighty-hour weeks, tortured by Marvel's immovable deadlines, last-minute rewrites, and too-many-cooks indecision over, say, Thanos's exact shade of purple.

I spoke to several VFX artists, under the condition of anonymity. (Marvel is said to blackball firms that push back.) Some said that Marvel stress was a symptom of larger problems in the effects industry, which is decentralized across the globe, owing to tax incentives, and clearly in need of labor protections. "Marvel is the easy punching bag," one said. But another told me, "They have a tendency to change their minds pretty late, and in effects that's where we take all the heat." He pointed out one scene, in "Endgame," in which the Avengers go back in time. During production, the actors wore placeholder motion-capture suits, which were then gussied up with C.G.I. "They could have just worn the costumes, and it would have been a billion times easier," the VFX artist said.

A month after "Quantumania" opened, Disney abruptly fired Victoria Alonso, Marvel's long-serving head of postproduction and a member of the Trio, fuelling speculation that she was responsible—or being scapegoated—for the VFX issues. Disney said that Alonso had violated her contract by promoting an Oscar-nominated feature that she had produced for another studio. She declined to comment, but a source close to the matter told a different story: Alonso, a gay Latina, had been barred from the "Wakanda Forever" press tour after she gave a speech accepting an award from GLAAD which criticized Disney's handling of Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill. When her team was then asked to edit out rainbow flags and other pride symbols from a San Francisco street scene in "Quantumania" for certain release territories, she refused, and the outside film she'd produced was used as a pretext to fire her. ("It's not credible," the former executive I spoke to said, of this narrative. "We've been doing whatever was asked of us by China, Russia, and the Middle East for twenty years.") After her lawyer threatened "serious consequences," Alonso reached a multimillion-dollar settlement with Disney.



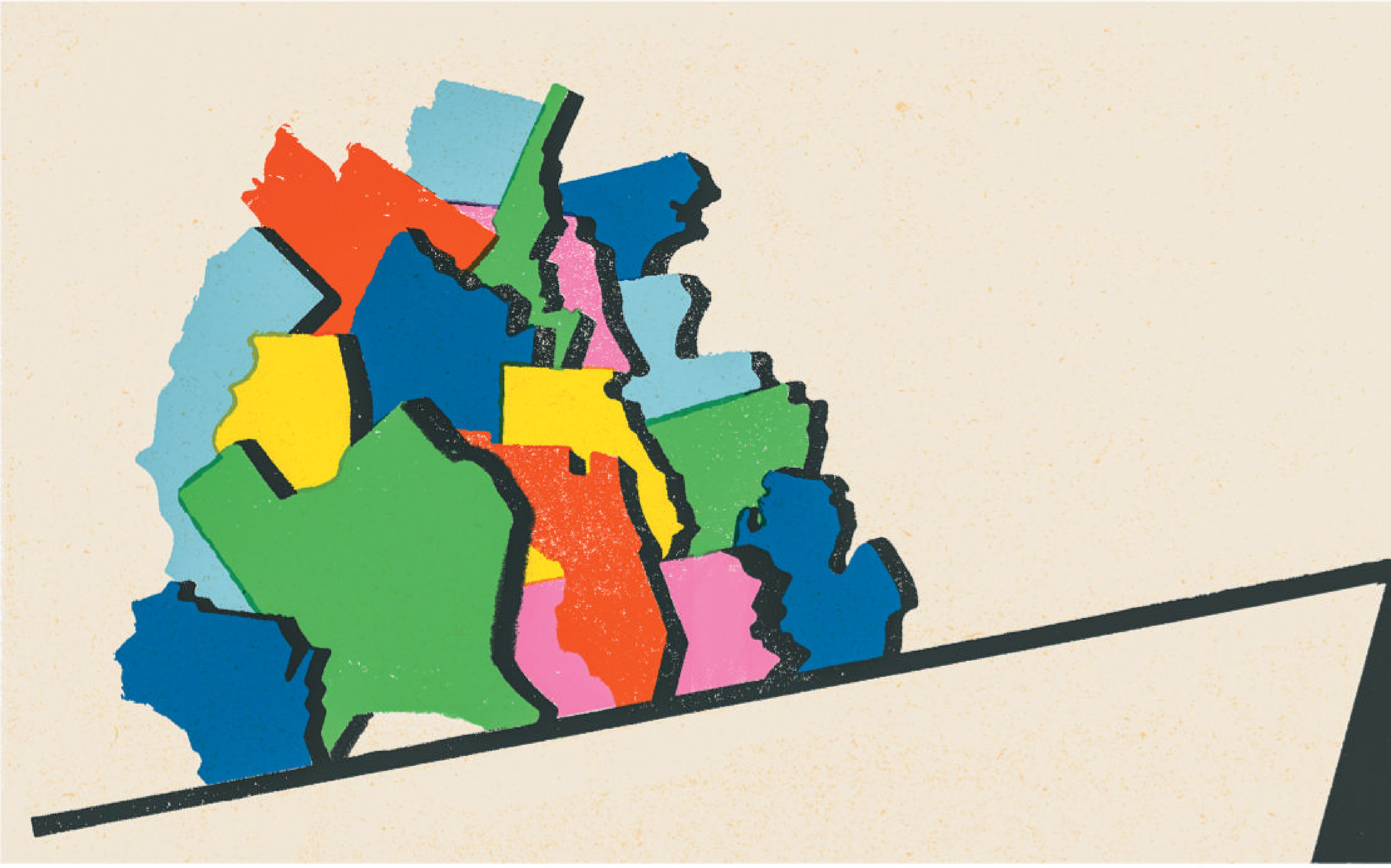
"Quantumania" set up a new supervillain, Kang, played by Jonathan Majors, who would recur throughout the Multiverse Saga. In March, Majors was arrested on charges of assault, harassment, and strangulation, after an incident with his girlfriend. He denied wrongdoing, but the scandal has handed Marvel a dilemma. Two weeks later, Disney terminated Perlmutter as Marvel's chairman. Perlmutter, who remains one of Disney's largest individual shareholders, had recently antagonized Iger by pushing (unsuccessfully) for his friend Nelson Peltz to get a seat on Disney's board. Perlmutter told the *Wall Street Journal* that he'd been fired for, among other things, aggressive pursuit of cost-cutting. Iger cited "redundancy."

All this followed Iger's comments, at an investor conference, that Disney would reduce its content, including endless Marvel retreads. "Sequels typically work well for us, but do you need a third or a fourth, for instance?" he said. With all the oversaturation, palace intrigue, and brand deterioration, the M.C.U. juggernaut finally appeared to be showing cracks. The release, last month, of "Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3"—which grossed twenty-eight million dollars less on its opening weekend than the previous installment—did little to dispel the feeling that Marvel fatigue is real, and that Feige is spread too thin for the avalanche of content. "The one downside to Marvel is that it all bottlenecks at Kevin," the former executive said. "I think everyone's agreeing that this is not the optimal amount of stuff." Scientists predict that our own universe will begin to contract in the next hundred million years; the Marvel Cinematic Universe, having reached its outer limits, may be subject to a similar law of nature.

On a Thursday last November, I went to the Regal Union Square multiplex, in Manhattan, to see "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" on opening night. It was playing on twelve of seventeen screens, but even that wasn't enough to prop up a dying theatrical model: weeks later, Regal's parent company, which had filed for bankruptcy, revealed plans to close the Union Square location, along with thirty-eight others.

For now, though, the escalators filled up with Marvel fans. Jacob, an N.Y.U. student, had seen his first Marvel movie, "The Avengers," for a friend's tenth birthday. His favorite character was the Scarlet Witch, he said, because she was "constantly getting things thrown at her and overcoming them." Richard, an aspiring game designer, in a Marvel T-shirt and hipster glasses, had been reading the comics since he was five. "I still feel very protective of those characters," he said. His favorite M.C.U. hero was Captain America, because of the character's commitment to his principles ("a douchey thing to say"). Richard, who has a Mexican dad and a Black stepmom, called Marvel "one of the most powerful engines we have to teach people about difference." After the film, he emerged from the theatre shaken by how it had connected the grief over Boseman's Black Panther with postcolonial trauma: "A lot of us who support sci-fi and genre storytelling have suffered deep cultural losses that we're still learning how to understand."

Coming up the escalators was Tim, a twenty-five-year-old financial analyst and Marvel "aficionado." His favorite character was Ant-Man, because "we're both really short," he said. After seeing "Endgame," he'd caught up on the M.C.U. on Disney+. "Honestly, now that we work from home, I watch during the day," he said. When I asked him to name the last movie he'd seen in a theatre, he said "Thor: Love and Thunder." "I only go to the theatres for Marvel," he admitted. "Even if I just go to Marvel movies, it's three or four a year. So I'm, like, O.K., that's enough." ♦



LETTER FROM NORTH CAROLINA

MINORITY RULES

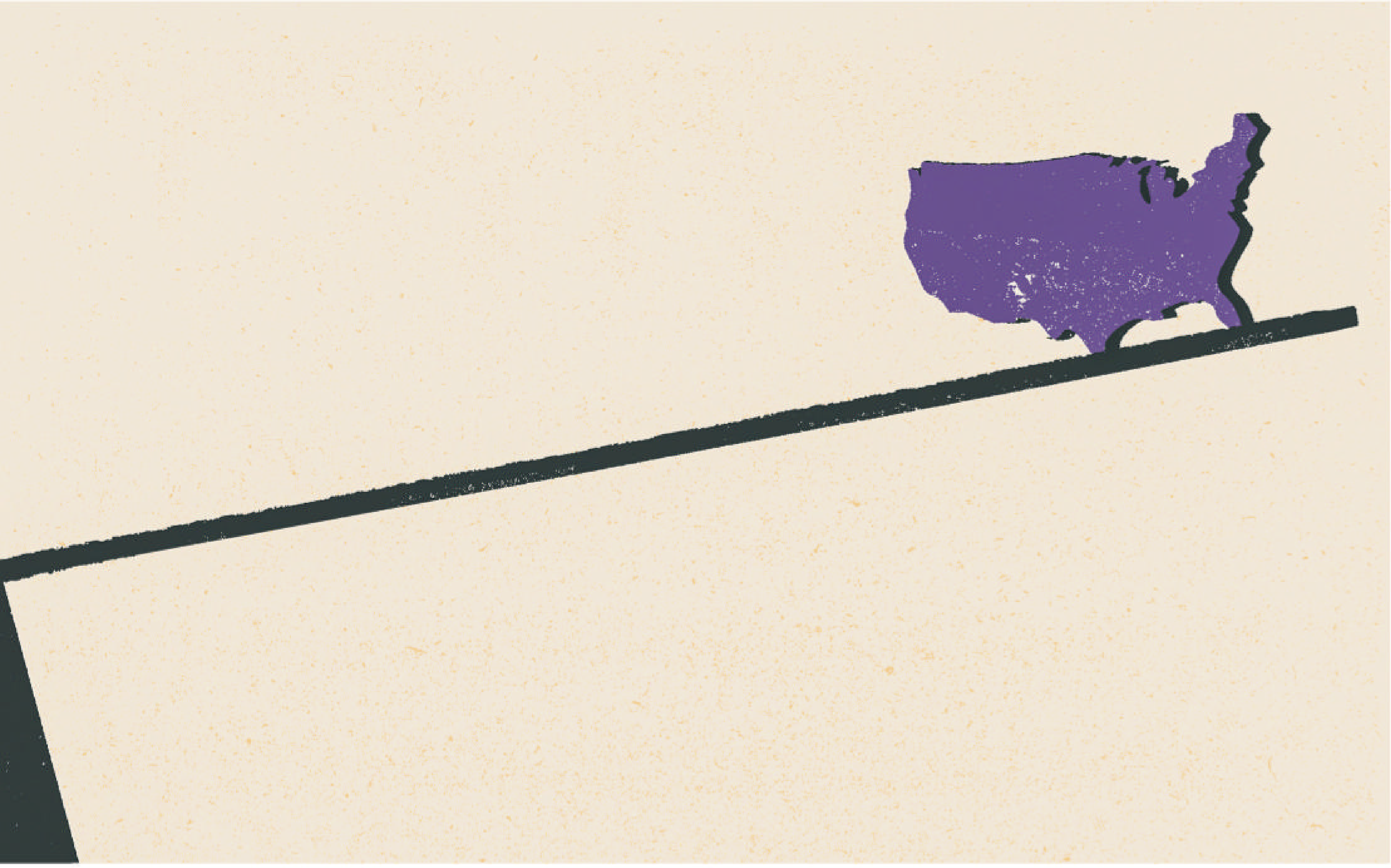
The once fringe legal theory that became a threat to democracy.

BY ANDREW MARANTZ

The Museum of the Albemarle, on the eastern shore of North Carolina, is a spacious building the color of sand and sea glass. It's in Elizabeth City, about as far from the Research Triangle as Baltimore is from New York City, but you can get there and back in the same day if you know how to drive fast without getting pulled over. "There are a hundred counties in this state, and I've spent time in every one," Sailor Jones, a democracy activist, told me this past fall, on his way to speak at the museum. He was a skillful multitasker—sipping from a huge fountain Coke, tweaking a Rihanna-heavy playlist, and taking call after call on speakerphone, all while bombing his Toyota 4Runner down an empty stretch of highway bisecting a cotton farm. Jones is forty-eight, with sandy hair and a round face; he grew up in northeastern North Carolina, a rural, working-class part of the state. "When I tell people I was born in a tobacco field, I'm only exaggerating, like, a *tiny* bit," he said. He is white, but he's from a county that is, like Elizabeth City, majority Black. "If you're used to the powers that be either passively ignoring you or actively screwing you over, for generations, it's natural to hear about some new nefarious thing they're up to and think, Same shit, different day," he said. "The challenge for us, messaging-wise, is to find a way to tell folks, You're not wrong, but, also, this one really is different."

"This one" was Moore v. Harper, a Supreme Court case that was set to be argued in December and resolved by the end of June. In 2021, with Tim Moore as the speaker of the North Carolina House, the majority-Republican legislature drew gerrymandered congressional maps—that is, even more egregiously gerrymandered than usual. Several voters (one of them named Becky Harper) and a handful of nonprofits (including Common Cause, where Jones works) sued to block the implementation of those maps, and the state Supreme Court ruled in their favor. The U.S. Supreme Court was asked to decide whether the legislature's maps should stand—and, by extension, whether the state court had the power to review them at all. As with many Supreme Court cases, this

An extreme version of the theory could give state legislatures the power to award Electoral College votes however they see fit.



is a narrow-sounding question that could have vast consequences. "It's hard to overstate how wild it would be if this went the wrong way," Marina Jenkins, the executive director of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, told me.

If the Supreme Court reverses the state-court ruling, it would be a vindication of the independent-state-legislature theory, or I.S.L.T., a line of legal reasoning that scarcely existed twenty-five years ago but has since travelled from the fringes of legal discourse to the centers of power. Some advocates of the theory interpret a clause of the Constitution to mean that state legislatures can run federal elections almost however they choose—drawing maps for partisan advantage, outlawing forms of voting (such as mail-in ballots) that tend to favor one party, and challenging election results on thin procedural grounds. Even when these actions violate state constitutions, the advocates say, state courts would be powerless to stop them. (It's this lack of oversight that would render the legislatures "independent," though a less euphemistic word for it might be "rogue.") A still more drastic version of the theory—not one directly at issue in the case, but one that might follow from its logic—could allow a legislature to award its state's Electoral College votes to any Presidential candidate, even one who lost its popular vote. After the 2020 election, lawyers arguing on behalf of Donald Trump asked the Supreme Court to set aside what they called "unlawful election results" in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and two other states, based on unfounded claims of fraud, and let the state legislatures decide the outcome instead. Their rationale was I.S.L.T.

"Descriptively speaking, it's not a doctrine, because there is no case law behind it," Erwin Chemerinsky, the dean of the law school at the University of California, Berkeley, told me. "Normatively speaking, I hope it doesn't become a doctrine, because it's incredibly frightening." An unusually wide range of legal scholars, from staunch originalists to loose constructionists, share this view. The list of people who have signed on to Supreme Court briefs opposing I.S.L.T. includes Steven Calabresi, a co-founder of the Federalist Society; twenty-one U.S. senators; Arnold Schwarzenegger; a group of retired four-star generals; and J. Michael Luttig, a conservative retired judge, who called Moore v. Harper "the most important case for American democracy literally since the founding of the nation." Yet Justices Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, and Clarence Thomas all indicated, in a shadow-docket opinion last year, that they found I.S.L.T. compelling, and Brett Kavanaugh, writing separately, sounded open to being persuaded.

Jones and two colleagues got to the Elizabeth City museum around sunset. They were there to convene a town-hall-style meeting—half explainer about I.S.L.T., half pep rally—stop No. 4 on a statewide road show that they had nicknamed the Moore Tour. Jones is an inveterate people person—a hugger, a birthday rememberer, a first-name repeater. He revels in the kind of salt-of-the-earth phrases ("nary a soul," "two shakes of a lamb's tail") that might sound affected coming from a carpetbagging politician, but not from him. In the parking lot, he ran into Keith Rivers, the head of the local N.A.A.C.P. "Why, Keith

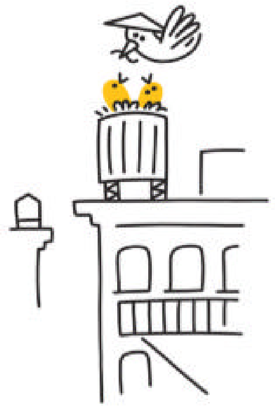
ILLUSTRATION BY GOLDEN COSMOS

Rivers, as I live and breathe," Jones said.

The audience inside the museum—two dozen already seated, a dozen more trickling in—skewed toward the civic-minded and the semiretired: churchgoing grandmothers, candidates for school board. Onstage, Jones recounted a few episodes from recent North Carolina history when the legislature had attempted a draconian overreach, protests had erupted outside the statehouse, and lawmakers had backed off. Then he led a call-and-response chant, one that the audience knew well: "When we fight together, we what?" "We win!" It made for rousing theatre, yet it was hard to tell whether he meant it literally. (As any student of history knows, the people, united, are all too often defeated.) Chris Shenton, a lawyer with the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, outlined the constitutional argument against I.S.L.T. "What the Supreme Court is being asked to do here is completely bogus," he said. The over-all tone was roughly that of flight attendants making a pre-takeoff announcement during a rainstorm: Everything will surely be fine, but here's what to expect in the unlikely event of an emergency.

Flight attendants use euphemistic doublespeak because, understandably, they want to avoid terms like "hijacking" and "September 11th." For similar reasons, Jones spoke in broad terms, without directly invoking Trump or January 6th. (There were also other reasons for this, such as Common Cause's nonpartisan status.) Even so, the implications were clear. At one point, an organizer sitting in the audience stood, using a cane, and gave an impromptu speech, urging listeners to imagine a Supreme Court opinion that enabled legislatures to rig elections at will. "There was a time when I used to think things like that couldn't happen," he said. "But then we had January 6th, Roe—these things *can* happen. They're happening."

On the night of December 11, 2000, the CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer reported live from the steps of the Supreme Court. The Justices had just heard oral arguments in Bush v. Gore; the following day, they would issue their ruling. Blitzer was interviewing a Republican lawyer, a ruddy-faced young man with a slight Kermit the Frog lilt in his voice, who had clerked for Justice Anthony Kennedy at the Supreme Court, had helped draft the Starr Report that led to President Bill Clinton's impeachment, and was now part of the legal team advising George W. Bush. The question in Bush v. Gore was whether a manual vote recount in Florida should be allowed to continue. The (Democrat-appointed-majority) Supreme Court of Florida wanted it to go on; members of the (Republican-majority) legislature did not. The lawyer argued that it should stop. "Article II of the Constitution," he said, "delegates authority directly to the state legislatures."



The young lawyer's name was Brett Kavanaugh. That his stark reading of Article II aligned with his immediate partisan interest was, he insisted, a mere coincidence. "I think what we're seeing is more of a divide over how to interpret the Constitution than, really, political differences," he said. "What are the enduring values that are going to stand a generation from now?" He was describing what was not yet known as the independent-state-legislature theory, given that the theory was still taking shape.

A month earlier, when Election Day had ended without a clear result, the Bush team had chartered planes to Florida and set up a makeshift "nerve center" at the G.O.P. headquarters in Tallahassee. "They didn't really have space for us, so we had all our papers laid out on the floor and stuff," Michael Carvin, one of the lawyers, told me. Amy Coney Barrett, then a twenty-eight-year-old law associate, spent a week in the suburbs of Palm Beach doing research for the team; John Roberts, who was forty-five, flew to Tallahassee at least twice—first to advise the campaign's lawyers and then to advise Jeb Bush, the governor. "We had the great fortune to assemble, essentially, a legal 'dream team,'" Ted Cruz, another of Bush's attorneys, later said in an Associated Press story. The group held marathon strategy sessions, seeking ways to stop the recount, which seemed to be moving in Gore's direction. "We kept looking through the Constitution, and obviously at some point the word 'legislature' jumped out at us," Carvin said.

The independent-state-legislature theory ultimately boils down to a single word: "legislature." It appears in two relevant places in the Constitution—the Elections Clause, which pertains to how federal elections are administered, and the Electors Clause, regarding the appointment of Presidential electors. Both processes are to be directed in "each State" by "the Legislature thereof." Benjamin Ginsberg, the Bush-Cheney campaign's national counsel, told me that, in 2000, I.S.L.T. "was never our main focus. It was one of many things we were flinging against the wall." John Bolton, one of the Bush campaign's lawyers, who later served as national-security adviser under Trump, told me, "I don't know that we fully thought through the future implications. It was more, The clock is ticking. What else can we try?" In his book "Down and Dirty: The Plot to Steal the Presidency," from 2001, Jake Tapper attributes the I.S.L.T. eureka moment to Don Rubottom, then a mid-level Republican staffer in the Florida House, who went to work the morning after Election Day and showed his boss the Electors Clause. "My thing was, If this comes down to the wire, it looks like the Constitution says it's our job to step in," Rubottom told me. By December 11th, Republicans in the Florida legislature had introduced a resolution appointing a slate of electors for Bush. "The House even passed it," Rubottom said. "But then Bush v. Gore happened."

Laurence Tribe, a law professor emeritus at Harvard, represented Gore in a related case that went to the Supreme Court shortly before Bush v. Gore. "We knew that this was a claim that was out there, about the primacy of the legislature, but, frankly, we thought it was such a flimsy argument that none of the Justices would be tempted by it," Tribe told me. "So, when Chief Justice Rehnquist started asking me about it during oral argument, I thought, Oh, that's not good news." On December 12th, the Court issued the ruling in Bush v. Gore that made Bush the President-elect. The constitutional ground was the Fourteenth Amendment, but William Rehnquist, joined by Thomas and Antonin Scalia, wrote a concurring opinion, holding that "there are additional grounds that require us" to find in Bush's favor. The first one he mentioned was the ostensible special power of the state legislature. (He put the word "legislature" in italics, for added emphasis.)

As Rehnquist's italics suggested, I.S.L.T. might seem like an open-and-shut case. "Pretty simple," Carvin told me. "Legislature means legislature." And yet, in a text as multivalent as the Constitution, a cigar is never just a cigar. Does "freedom of speech" mean only literal speech, or does it also refer to a written sign, a pornographic image, an algorithm, a campaign contribution? Does "well regulated Militia" cover only literal militias, or can it also apply to a suburban mom who wants to exercise her inalienable right to bring a Ruger to church?

Akhil Amar, a law professor at Yale, is one of the most frequently cited legal scholars in the country. When it comes to the Supreme Court, he is an ur-institutionalist who can rhapsodize at length about the courtroom's marble friezes, and who has long counted multiple Justices as personal friends. (A few months ago, on a podcast he hosts, he referred to Samuel Alito as "a principled person" and "one of the smartest lawyers I know.") On the question of I.S.L.T., though, he is uncharacteristically cutting. In a recent debate at the Federalist Society, he conceded that the plain-text position sounded plausible on its face, but he described his own view as "clearly the better view for anyone who's gone to law school and who has a brain." Last year, he and his brother Vikram, the dean of the University of Illinois College of Law, published a law-review article called "Eradicating *Bush*-League Arguments Root and Branch," positing that the Framers actually intended for "legislature" to mean a state's entire lawmaking apparatus, including the judicial and executive branches. "This kind of thing happens in the Constitution all the time," Vikram told me. (For example, the Constitution says that "New States may be admitted by the Congress," but the process has always involved the President, and courts have weighed in, too.) Extreme proponents of I.S.L.T. maintain that the legislature's power over elections is "plenary"—unconstrained by state courts. But the Amar brothers contend that there is no indication that this power was meant to be so absolute. "That's just not how it works," Vikram said.

Unlike right-wing legal arguments against abortion rights and gun control, I.S.L.T. was not the product of a multi-decade political movement. There is no such thing as an I.S.L.T. think tank or a single-issue I.S.L.T. voter. Leah Litman, a law professor at the University of Michigan, argues that it's hardly even a theory; she prefers to call it the "independent-state-legislature thingy," or simply "right-wing fanfic." Tribe, the Harvard professor, put an even finer point on it: "This wasn't something that had an organic development in the law. It was, frankly, something that was pulled out of somebody's butt, because they thought it was a convenient way to fulfill a short-term partisan agenda." Despite the Justices' repeated attestations that they are not politicians in robes, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that I.S.L.T. is an idea tailor-made to empower state legislatures and federal courts, entities that have been disproportionately shaped by the Republican Party.

To the extent that there is serious scholarship buttressing I.S.L.T., much of it has been promulgated by one guy, an associate professor at Florida State University named Michael Morley. He graduated from Yale Law School in 2003, clerked for a conservative circuit-court judge, and has since attended dozens of Federalist Society events. Morley did not submit an amicus brief in Moore v. Harper; reached recently by e-mail, he wrote that he has "consistently and publicly criticized attempts to cast doubt on the outcome of the 2020 Presidential election." A law professor who knows Morley told me, "I don't think he's a total wing nut. I think he found an interesting academic argument that no one else was making, and the work he did on it has been important to his career, so now he can't fully walk away from it, but he can't fully defend it, either." Law journals are full of provocative thought experiments. They all seem like fun and games until someone uses one to justify an insurrection.

After Bush v. Gore, I.S.L.T. became a potential Chekhov's gun of the American experiment—a relatively obscure one, gathering dust in a corner. It almost never came up, except maybe as a piece of bar trivia. "Between 2000 and 2020, most law students—even most law professors—would not have heard the words 'independent' and 'legislature' in the same sentence," Evan Tsen Lee, a professor emeritus at the University of California College of the Law, San Francisco, told me. Concurring opinions generally have no legal force; and, unusually, even the Court's opinion in Bush v. Gore included a caveat that it was not to be taken as precedent. Vikram Amar told me that, for two decades, "the Court never cited Bush v. Gore, so most of us thought,

"What keeps me going? The tightening feeling in my chest that if I stop I'll die."

This is behind us. Why beat up the conservatives for something they seem to recognize was wrong?"

In 2020, after Donald Trump lost the Presidential election, he ordered a team of lawyers to help him un-lose it. The most public-facing of them—Rudolph Giuliani, Sidney Powell—came from politics, or from undistinguished careers in private practice. For a few darkly comic weeks, they flailed on live TV, inviting reporters to a landscaping company's garage and vowing to "release the Kraken." "I know crimes," Giuliani said during a televised press conference, hair dye streaking down his face. "I can smell 'em." ("This sounds SO FUCKING CRAZY," Raj Shah, who had left the Trump White House for Fox News, texted while watching Giuliani, according to communications revealed in Dominion Voting Systems' lawsuit against Fox. "He objectively looks like he was a dead person voting 2 weeks ago.")

A lesser-known but more formidable member of Trump's legal team was John Eastman, a former law-school dean, a fellow at the right-wing think tank the Claremont Institute, and a former clerk and longtime friend of Justice Clarence Thomas. If Giuliani and Powell looked like made-for-cable-TV lawyers, then Eastman, with half-rimmed glasses and silver hair, seemed made for the seminar room. While the TV lawyers tantrummed, and Trump worked the phones, Eastman looked for a constitutional loophole. Cleta Mitchell, another Trump lawyer, e-mailed Eastman after the election, writing, "A movement is stirring. But needs constitutional support." She asked, "What would you think of producing a legal memo outlining the constitutional role of state legislators in designating electors? . . . Am I crazy?"

Eastman didn't think so. After the 2000 election, he had testified before the Florida legislature. ("We went on a mission yesterday to find somebody who could be sort of qualified as a, quote, expert, if you will," a state senator said, introducing him. "He's come all the way from California—actually overnight.") Eastman told the legislators that they didn't have to wait for permission from the courts: the Constitution gave them the power, which "knows no other appeal," to determine how the Presidential electors should be allocated. If it had been up to him, that election would have been decided unilaterally by a state legislature.

In 2020, Eastman made the same argument. Shortly after the election was called for Joe Biden, Eastman went to Philadelphia, where a group of Trump aides asked him to advise them on post-election strategy; the meeting lasted only fifteen minutes, but that was enough for him to catch COVID. A few days later, he spoke by video at a Federalist Society conference. (The theme was "The Rule of Law and the Current Crisis"; the keynote speaker was Samuel Alito.) The following month, while spending Christmas Eve with family in Texas, he wrote a memo labelled "Privileged and Confidential: January 6 scenario." He then wrote a more detailed memo asserting that "the U.S. Constitution assigns to the *legislatures* of the states the plenary power to determine the manner for choosing presidential electors." Like Rehnquist, he added the italics.

Kenneth Chesebro, another member of Trump's legal team, maintained that legislators in seven swing states could simply pretend that Trump had won, and submit slates of fake electors to that effect. ("Fake" is actually the word that one lawyer used in his e-mails, before catching himself and writing, " 'Alternative' votes is probably a better term than 'fake' votes," followed by a smiley face.) In a historical coincidence, Chesebro had worked as a research assistant for Laurence Tribe after the 2000 election, when they had discussed the Electors Clause at length. "He was a bit of a hanger-on, to be honest, and he didn't seem to have much of a moral compass," Tribe told me. "I'd hate to think that those conversations inadvertently planted the seed that became the evil tree of I.S.L.T." (A lawyer for Chesebro later said that he was merely advising the Trump campaign to keep "its options open.") In 2022, a district-court judge referred to the Trump team's post-election machinations as "a coup in search of a legal theory." To the extent that there was such a theory, it was the independent-state-legislature theory.

On January 6th, shortly before Trump spoke at the Ellipse and encouraged his supporters to march to the Capitol, Eastman took the stage wearing a felt fedora. He gave a fiery speech, imploring Vice-President Mike Pence to delay certifying the election. "This is bigger than President Trump," he said. "It is the very essence of our republican form of government." Meanwhile, Luttig, the conservative retired judge, privately lobbied against Eastman, who had once been his clerk. "I told the Vice-President's team, 'I know that John is very smart, but I have absolutely no idea what he's thinking on this one,' " Luttig told me. "If the Vice-President had done what John had asked him to do—well, I've spent the last two years contemplating what would have happened, and I think it would have plunged the country into a paralyzing constitutional crisis." In the end, of course, Pence refused, and the election was certified for Biden. In Moore v. Harper, only one legal academic filed an amicus brief in support of the North Carolina legislature's position on I.S.L.T.: John Eastman.

Recently, I reached Eastman by phone. He's originally from Nebraska, and he speaks with a mild high-plains cadence—except when he gets worked up, which happened a few times. "Most of the legal academy doesn't take seriously the original understanding of the Constitution," he told me, denouncing not only leftists but also most conservatives, including "the anti-Trump crowd, which I don't consider to be Republican lawyers anymore." By refusing to delay the certification, Pence had "accepted the view that the role that the Constitution assigned to him was merely that of a potted plant." Eastman still believes that Biden's victory was wrongly certified, and that many recent elections have likely been marred by voter fraud. (He even suggested that the dimpled chads in 2000 were evidence of intentional malfeasance, which was a new one on me.) Eastman's role in the attempts to overturn the 2020 election had already landed him in a good deal of trouble: he'd been brought in for questioning by the January 6th committee, had his phone seized by the F.B.I., and was in danger of being expelled from the State Bar of California. Still, he claimed not to understand what all the fuss was about. Until recently, he said, "I thought everybody agreed that the legislatures got to do this."

A few years ago, many pundits might have considered it unthinkable that the Supreme Court would give a hearing to a theory such as I.S.L.T. But recent events have changed the consensus view of what's possible. Two days after the 2020 election, Ginni Thomas, Clarence Thomas's wife, texted Trump's chief of staff a meme asserting that the "Biden crime family & ballot fraud co-conspirators . . . will be living in barges off GITMO." The following summer, during a reunion of Justice Thomas and his former clerks at a resort, golf course, and shooting club in West Virginia, Ginni posed for a photo, according to the Washington *Post*. She was flashing a double thumbs-up and standing next to a grinning John Eastman. On the merits, I.S.L.T. may deserve to be rebuked in a lacerating 9–0 decision. But "the merits" don't decide what the law is. Judges do.

OPERATION FATHER'S DAY

Sailor Jones grew up in Warren County, one of the poorest counties in North Carolina. In the early eighties, when he was in elementary school, the governor, a Democrat, advanced a plan allowing tons of carcinogenic chemicals to be dumped in a nearby soybean field. A group of local activists engaged in a six-week civil-disobedience campaign, lying in the roads to block the dump trucks. Warren County became known as the birthplace of the environmental-justice movement, but the campaign failed—the protesters were arrested and the field became a toxic landfill. Jones spent his summer breaks curing tobacco. "This was the era of 'Sure, honey, segregation is over,' but everyone knows it ain't really over," he said. Later, in the fights for gay rights, trans rights, and voting rights, the same lesson would be reinforced: there's what the rules say, on paper, and then there's what the people in power can get away with.

Common Cause has brought dozens of major lawsuits, several of which have gone before the Supreme Court, but most of its work is more incremental and lower-profile: election hotlines, pamphlets about ranked-choice voting. It was founded in 1970 by a liberal Republican fed up with the Nixon Administration's self-dealing; its objective was bipartisan democracy reform, which then seemed achievable. (As Rick Perlstein recounts in his book "Reaganland," both parties supported a comprehensive voting-rights package in 1977, until it was scuttled by members of the New Right, including Ronald Reagan.) Common Cause is now perceived as progressive, which says less about a change in its priorities than about the major parties' evolving views on universal suffrage.

American activists of all stripes, paraphrasing Justice Louis Brandeis, have long referred to the states as laboratories of democracy. But the adage has started to reverse itself: in the past two years alone, there has been one book called "Laboratories Against Democracy" and another called "Laboratories of Autocracy." North Carolina is often cited as a paradigmatic case. It's a purple state—Barack Obama won it in 2008 and lost it in 2012—but in many recent years Republicans have enjoyed super-majorities in the legislature, and they have used this power to grant themselves more power. After the Republican Pat McCrory was elected governor, in 2012, the state passed what voting-rights advocates called the monster election law—a combination of voter-I.D. requirements, reduced access to polling sites, and other obstacles that made it, at the time, among the most suppressive laws of its kind in the country. (A court later overturned the law, ruling that it would "target African Americans with almost surgical precision.")

When a referendum outlawing same-sex marriage was on the ballot, in 2012, Jones protested by running across the state, or most of it, "which is even more impressive once you understand how bad I am at running." In 2016, North Carolina became the first state to pass a so-called bathroom bill, forcing people to conform to the biological sex on their birth certificate. Both these fights were personal for Jones, who married a woman and later came out as a trans man. "Attacking queer folks seems like good politics if you represent an extreme partisan district where you're insulated from public opinion," Jones told me. These days, he said, whenever he visits the North Carolina statehouse, "I make it a point to stop by the men's room, even if it's just to wash my hands."

In 2016, the anti-democratic maneuvers grew more brazen. McCrory ran for reëlection and narrowly lost, but he didn't concede to his Democratic successor, Roy Cooper, for nearly a month, citing "serious concerns of potential voter fraud." This received less attention than it might have, given the Presidential election that happened at the same time. (McCrory recently told me that he now believes Cooper's victory was legitimate, although he mentioned that the election had included some "bad things" and "unfortunate coincidences," including faulty Dominion voting machines.) During McCrory's remaining time in office, the legislature convened for a special session and stripped the incoming governor of a wide range of powers. "Partisanship, hardball politics—that we were familiar with," Mike Woodard, a

"Well, the 'beauty' part is more obvious when she's awake."

Democratic state senator, told me. "But not just pulling the rug out like that."

That year, Republicans in North Carolina won a narrow majority of the vote but ended up with ten of the thirteen congressional seats. During a public hearing, David Lewis, the head of the state's House redistricting committee, confessed that his committee had created a map with ten Republican districts and three Democratic districts "because I do not believe it's possible to draw a map with eleven Republicans and two Democrats." Lewis had not been caught on a hot mike or injected with truth serum. He and his colleagues hoped to avoid being busted for racial gerrymandering, which violates the Voting Rights Act, by admitting to partisan gerrymandering, which doesn't. (Never mind that in North Carolina, as in many states, partisan gerrymandering and racial gerrymandering achieve essentially the same thing.) Common Cause sued, and the case went to the Supreme Court. Justice Roberts, writing for the majority, acknowledged that partisan gerrymandering is "incompatible with democratic principles" but decided to let it slide anyway, reasoning that the matter was better handled by other entities, including state courts.

In 2020, David Lewis retired, after pleading guilty to making a false statement to a bank. Tim Moore, the speaker of the House, oversaw a new, more extreme round of gerrymandering. Common Cause sued once again in state court, the case that would become Moore v. Harper. "The Supreme Court had just told us, If you don't like the way your state legislature's treating you, take it up with state courts," Jones said. "So that's exactly what we did." In February, 2022, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that the gerrymandered maps violated the state constitution. Normally, this would have been the end of it. But Moore appealed, on the basis of I.S.L.T., and, shockingly, that June, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to take the case.

The conventional wisdom was that the three liberal Justices would almost certainly reject I.S.L.T., and the three most conservative Justices almost certainly would not. This left the three Justices who currently pass for moderates—the three who worked for the Bush legal team in 2000—as the likely swing votes. Not long ago, I met up with Chris Shenton and his colleagues at the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, in an office park on the outskirts of Durham, as they prepared potential arguments in Moore v. Harper. "There are a couple of ways to split the baby on this one, but not many," Shenton told me. "You either think the whole concept of I.S.L.T. is coherent or you don't." In 2015, in a case called Arizona State Legislature v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission, the Court had rejected a version of I.S.L.T. Another coalition lawyer, Hilary Harris Klein, said that it would be highly unusual for the Court to reverse such a recent major precedent.

"They could probably find a way," Shenton said.

"Well, sure," Klein said, "they could do anything, if logic and principles go out the window."

The North Carolina Capitol, in Raleigh, was built in the familiarly grand Greek Revival style. The State Legislative Building, a block away and fashioned out of concrete in the sixties, looks more like a formerly upscale airport hotel. One day last fall, I visited with two Common Cause employees. We ran into Woodard, the Democratic senator, who was in the middle of a garrulous conversation with a Republican colleague. "I'm a guy who's willing to work with everyone, who gets along personally with a lot of folks," Woodard told me. But in his office, with the door closed, he added, "When it comes to a lot of fundamental things—voting rights, gerrymandering—I honestly don't trust them." One of the many framed trinkets on his walls was a quote by Belva Lockwood, an uplifting sentiment that unfortunately has not been borne out by history: "Reforms are slow, but they never go backward."

The Common Cause staffers were there to meet with Pricey Harrison, a Democratic state legislator with Elizabeth Warren energy. They sat in an indoor courtyard, next to a lacklustre fountain, looking over the text of a draft bill that would take the ability to gerrymander away from the legislature, setting up an independent redistricting commission instead. Harrison had introduced the bill, with minor tweaks, in several legislative sessions, but Tim Moore had never allowed it to come up for a vote. "If Moore v. Harper goes the wrong way," she said, "maybe this whole thing becomes futile." I asked Harrison what it was like to work with colleagues who seemed ambivalent, at best, about the basic ground rules of democracy. "I'm an old-fashioned Southerner, so I don't like conflict," she said. But she mentioned, almost as an aside, that I might find it "interesting" to meet a freshman legislator named Donnie Loftis. I didn't understand what she was driving at until, just before we knocked on his door, one of the Common Cause employees spelled it out for me: Loftis had proudly participated in the break-in at the Capitol on January 6th. ("I got gassed three times and was at the entrance when they breached the door," he posted on Facebook.)

Loftis's legislative assistant, who is also his wife, invited us in. Loftis wore Oakley glasses and a tie with a tie chain; on his wall was a drawing of a bald eagle fighting a snake and a photo of himself as a younger man standing next to Jesse Helms, who has been called one of the most racist U.S. senators in modern history. I asked Loftis what he thought about the peaceful transfer of power. "We have been known for that for many years," he began. "And this last transfer of power was," he added, a bit haltingly, "different. At the same time, it's, like, What is the real truth? Who do you believe?" Some politicians, he added, "work on the premise 'I didn't lie to you, I just didn't tell you the whole truth.' Which I struggle with. I'd much rather you blatantly lie to me than try to deceive me in a roundabout way."

One night, while driving home from a stop on the Moore Tour, Jones asked Shenton, "Is there any part of you that thinks we can win?" They had pulled off the highway and were waiting in a drive-through line for fried-chicken sandwiches. "I think we can," Shenton said, though he added, "I wouldn't put money on it." Legal formalists believe that the law is bounded by invisible normative guardrails; legal realists believe that the law is whatever judges decide to do. When the Supreme Court first took a challenge to Obamacare, in 2012, many pundits were confident that the law would be upheld easily, maybe unanimously. But, Shenton said, "by the time the case was argued, it was a nail-biter." The strength of the underlying arguments had not changed. What had changed was public sentiment, media chatter, and partisan dynamics—the various extralegal inputs that shape what the Justices think, and, presumably, what they think they can get away with.

The sandwiches came, and Jones drove in silence for a while. Gino Nuzzolillo, a colleague who was sitting shotgun, compared Moore v. Harper to Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, the case that overturned the federal right to abortion. "I know that there were people just like us, on the ground, who were screaming about Dobbs around this time last year," he said. "And yet, for most people, until that opinion got leaked, they did not want to think it could actually happen." Unlike abortion rights, democracy isn't the sort of thing that can be eradicated overnight. Still, it was startling to think of democracy as just another tenuous compromise, one whose terms can always be renegotiated. Often, when groups like Common Cause organize rallies, the goal is to hold elected officials accountable. This time, their goal was to impose accountability on nine unelected Justices with life tenure, individuals whose relationship to public opinion seems to range from polite remove to open hostility. Jones said, "If I'm being honest, this one is a bit more of a Hail Mary."

Talk of the looming demise of democracy doesn't have to be wrong for it to have diminishing returns. The doomsayers may be directionally right but off by a few degrees—calculating the end to be slightly nigher than it is—or they may not be wrong at all. Still, the chorus of clanging alarm bells can have a habituating effect. "It's the end of the republic as we know it" may start to sound like "Act now while supplies last"—easy to shunt into the mental equivalent of a spam folder.

And yet we know from comparative political science that, when twenty-first-century democracies do collapse, they don't collapse all at once. The process is usually more gradual, like a hole in the ozone layer that widens, imperceptibly at first, setting off feedback loops that become harder to contain. By the time there's consensus that this is what's happening, it may be too late to stop it.

In 2015, in *The Journal of Democracy*, the political scientist Javier Corrales used the term "autocratic legalism." Crude totalitarian regimes might get their way through emergency powers or sweeping purges, but more sophisticated regimes can weaken checks on their power by bloodlessly manipulating the levers of the bureaucracy, thus retaining some plausible deniability. Corrales focussed on the Chávez government, in Venezuela, and its selective "use, abuse, and non-use of the rule of law." Instead of shutting down a critical media outlet, for example, the regime might burden it with specious investigations. Kim Lane Scheppele, who teaches international affairs at Princeton, has identified similar methods in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and elsewhere. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey has not banned opposition parties, but, prior to the most recent election, his party pushed through laws that diluted its rivals' electoral power. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, has proposed reforms that would give his governing coalition unprecedented control over the judiciary, while trying to maintain the appearance of legitimacy. "In all the democracies, including the United States, elected officials are those who choose judges," Netanyahu said this year, defending his position. "Is the United States not a democracy?"

For understandable reasons, the Supreme Court cases that get front-page coverage tend to bear on culture-war issues. But the most direct path to power, almost by definition, is to alter the rules of the game. This can take the form of wonky policy tweaks that the average voter might not even notice, yet the cumulative effect may be the difference between a democracy in substance and a democracy in name only. "You don't need to physically block voters from entering the polls," Scheppele said. "A lot of that can happen invisibly." Last year, Mark Lemley, a Stanford Law professor, published an article called "The Imperial Supreme Court," warning, "If the Court decides next Term that we don't have a right to elect the winners of elections, as it seems poised to do, it may dismantle the political apparatus of our country for good." If the Supreme Court does not issue a calamitous opinion in Moore, some cooler-headed pundits will surely take this as a sign that the invisible guardrails have held once again, chiding those who raised a false alarm. And yet averting a disaster once, or a hundred times, does not mean that the disaster was not worth worrying about in the first place. Even if the apparatus of democracy is not dismantled this year, or next year, it's worth reckoning with how easily it could be.

It is debatable when American democracy started to backslide, or to what extent, but there is no longer any objective reason, except for nostalgia or the stale fumes of American exceptionalism, to exclude the U.S. from consideration. Last year, Tim Michels, a Republican candidate for governor of Wisconsin, pledged to do away with the state's bipartisan elections commission. He also assured voters that, once he was in office, "Republicans will never lose another election in Wisconsin." In April, a Montana lawmaker named Zooey Zephyr argued against a bill restricting gender-affirming surgery for minors, implying that anyone who voted for the bill would have "blood on your hands." Her colleagues responded by banning her from the House floor for the rest of the legislative session. Daniel Kelly, a former judge who was a key adviser in Donald Trump's fake-elector scheme in Wisconsin, recently ran for the state Supreme Court. (A spokesperson for Kelly later said that he now "believes Joe Biden is the duly elected President.") He and Michels both lost, but only because it's not possible to gerrymander a statewide election: if the same vote patterns had been cast in a legislative election, the G.O.P. probably would have won. The Republican super-majority in the Wisconsin state legislature has signalled that it is open to impeaching the judge who beat Kelly; it just hasn't settled on a reason for it yet.

In "How to Save a Constitutional Democracy," the law professors Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq argue that some instances of democratic decay are organized around a charismatic leader, but that the process can also happen in the absence of a strongman or after a strongman leaves the stage. They call the latter dynamic "partisan degradation," in which the relevant actor is a party, not a person. "There's often this temptation to believe that as soon as you remove one major violator of norms—Trump, in the American context—the deep structural forces putting democracy under strain will dissipate," Huq told me. "It's wishful thinking." He mentioned Tennessee, where Republican legislators recently ejected two of their fellow-lawmakers from office for the crime of chanting protest slogans—a move that was more or less unprecedented, until it wasn't. "Once you get locked into that dynamic," he said, "it's not always obvious how, or whether, you can get out."

Some signs of democratic backsliding are relatively overt; others are more ambiguous. In November, a couple of weeks before the midterm elections, I drove to a convention-center ballroom in Hickory, in western North Carolina, for a bipartisan forum designed to reassure the public, county by county, that the electoral process could be trusted. The audience raised several stubborn narratives about voter fraud, familiar from Trump rallies and right-wing memes, and a series of election officials took turns patiently demystifying the process. Still, at least a few listeners were able to remain mystified. A local I.T. official started a sentence "When it comes to cybersecurity . . ." at which point he was interrupted by a heckler, who shouted, "No such thing as cybersecurity! Anything that's hooked up to the Internet can be hacked." The I.T. official did his best to explain that North Carolina's voting machines were not—in fact, could not be—connected to the Internet, but this seemed to have no effect. Afterward, in the parking lot, I approached the heckler, identified myself as a journalist, and asked if anything he'd heard had changed his mind. "Go pound sand," he said. He got in his car and slammed the door. Then, perhaps worried that he had been unclear, he rolled down his window, shouted, "Go fuck yourself," and peeled off.

I spent Election Day in Alamance County, where Sailor Jones lives. The county is politically diverse, but its longtime sheriff, Terry Johnson, is something like a small-town Joe Arpaio. In the summer of 2020, Johnson worked security at a rally in support of a Confederate monument, wearing a pink polo with a sheriff's star and no mask. A protester asked him why he was breaking the Governor's mask mandate. He chuckled and said, "Ma'am, why are *you* breaking the law? We know you're with Antifa."

In this election, Johnson was running for a fifth term, on a MAGA platform. On Election Day, I saw him in the parking lot of a polling place, wearing his pink sheriff's-department polo. Parked in front of the entrance was a military jeep bearing a P.O.W. flag and four signs that read "RE-ELECT TERRY JOHNSON." (A man standing next to Johnson, wearing a sheriff's-department jacket, said that it was his jeep.) A rumor was going around, on Facebook and elsewhere, that Johnson's name had been left off the ballot. Election officials had already taken the unusual step of opening two ballots, live on camera, to prove that this wasn't the case. I asked Johnson what he made of the rumor. "I trust the integrity of the Alamance County Board of Elections," he said, as if reading from an invisible teleprompter. That afternoon, I saw that the rumor had been amplified, if not started, by the official Facebook pages of the Alamance Republican Party and the Re-Elect Terry Johnson campaign.

According to the State Board of Elections, it is not permissible for "law enforcement to be stationed at a voting place." Was Johnson canvassing voters while in uniform, or subtly attempting to intimidate them, or merely standing in view of them? There's what the rules say, on paper, and then there's what the people in power can get away with. It would certainly be a stretch to say that democracy is dead in Alamance County—Johnson seemed authentically popular, and he won handily. Even so, the day after Election Day, Sailor Jones invited two of his colleagues to his house to lead a workshop on ballot curing. None of their most vivid fears had come to pass—no clear instances of voter suppression or intimidation. Still, Jones said, "if we thought our democracy was operating at a hundred per cent, we would be taking the day off."

As the oral arguments in Moore v. Harper began, on the morning of December 7th, it started to look as if the diehard proponents of I.S.L.T. would be disappointed. "Your position seems to go further than Chief Justice Rehnquist's position in Bush v. Gore," Justice Kavanaugh said, skeptically, to the lawyer representing Tim Moore. Outside, in front of the courthouse steps, Common Cause

DAVID ATTENBOROUGH WAS SUPPOSED TO PICK ME UP AN HOUR AGO...
UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

hosted a rally in a cold drizzle, with a go-go marching band. "This does not seem to be the nightmare time line," Jones said.

Leah Litman, of the University of Michigan, is a host of "Strict Scrutiny," a podcast about the Supreme Court, on which she often jokes that the current conservative majority's approach can be summarized as "No law, just vibes." Apparently, between June and December, there had been a vibe shift. It's possible that the three swing Justices had simply had time to reflect on the hundreds of pages of legal briefs, Kate Shaw, a Cardozo Law School professor and one of the other hosts, told me. "It's also possible that they noticed the enormous public outcry"—that they may have been swayed by any number of blog posts, radio segments, and perhaps even humble protest efforts like the Moore Tour.

Another thing that happened between June and December was the midterm election, in which the Republican Party had not met expectations. One theory was that the Court had overplayed its hand with Dobbs. Many full-throated election-denialist candidates, such as Kari Lake and Doug Mastriano, had also lost, which contributed to a burgeoning consensus that insurrectionism was not good politics. "If you're Roberts or Kavanaugh, you would have to be chastened by that," Michael Liroff, who co-hosts a staunchly legal-realist podcast called "5–4," told me. It's possible that Moore will be decided narrowly, or that it will end in a 3–3–3 split that doesn't fully resolve the question. Some might greet this as a victory, but Liroff wasn't so sure. "So a third of the Court is endorsing the logic of full-on insurrection," he said, "and that's the scenario that's supposed to make me feel like everything's fine?"

In last year's midterms, the North Carolina Supreme Court flipped from majority-Democrat to majority-Republican. This year, in another highly unusual move, the court reheard the case underlying Moore v. Harper, and, without citing any new evidence, decided that the gerrymandered maps it had just declared unconstitutional were now constitutional. Some pundits anticipated that the U.S. Supreme Court would throw out the case. As of this writing, that hasn't happened, but whatever action the Court takes this month may end up frustrating everyone, including the activists and scholars who hoped that the Court would dispense with I.S.L.T. once and for all. Vikram Amar, the University of Illinois professor, worried that, "if I.S.L.T. is allowed to stay alive and keep evolving," it could lead to disastrous outcomes, including the possibility of a stolen Presidential election. "If you're going to tell me that in America the norms are so strong that it's impossible to have one or two rogue legislatures, I'd have to say you've been asleep," he said. "I might have agreed with that in 2000, or 2015, but there's no way I could agree with it now."

I.S.L.T. is by no means the only Chekhov's gun. There's the Electoral Count Act of 1887, which, even after recent reforms, still contains potential loopholes; the prospect of "faithless electors" voting unpredictably in the Electoral College; and other scenarios that have been sketched out on obscure legal blogs or that have not yet been invented. As long as there are politicians determined to erode democracy, there will be plausible means by which they can try. In "How to Save a Constitutional Democracy," Ginsburg and Huq write of the "majestic vagueness" of the Constitution—a salutary tool in the hands of those who intend to expand democracy, a dangerous weapon in the hands of those who want to undermine it. "The document is sufficiently old and terse that you can, if you really want to, make a credible-sounding argument for almost anything," Huq said. "What has stopped this from descending into total farce, so far, is a shared political and legal culture, a sense of propriety and self-enforced boundaries. The happy story you can tell about that is that it has held back the tide for as long as it has. The less happy story is that there is no way to guarantee that it will last." ♦

Thursday

GEORGE SAUNDERS

ILLUSTRATION BY MARCIN WOLSKI

On the bright side, it was Thursday.

"Gerard, yes, hi, hello," said Mrs. Dwyer, the nurse's assistant sanctioned to hand over the Perlman headpiece and the big green pill and the smaller red one that activates the green one.

"How was the week?" she asked.

"Same," I said.

"Oh, gosh, sorry," she said.

In Treatment Room 4, she checked with the caliper to make sure the pressure foot of the Perlman was seated correctly.

It was.

She seemed a little nervous today.

"Green first," she said. "I know you know that."

I took the green.

"Good," she said. "Now the red. Then the *agua*."

I took the red. Drank the water from its pre-measured vial.

"Sit, wait, enjoy," she said. "May this bring you healing."

"Thanks," I said.

By law she had to stand there waiting until it kicked in.

"Everybody's got a right," she said absently.

"For sure," I said, anxious as always that this time it wouldn't work.

"To feel O.K.," she said, "in this crazy old—*wope*. There it is. Here it comes, yes?"

Here it came, yes.

It started, as usual, with a vague feeling of remembering: me, grass, summertime. Then came the youthful Memory Body, gradually occupying the Randomly Recalled Iconic Space: our yard on Plymouth Street, me on my back on the lawn, my sister, Clara, there beside me. Soon, wherever I looked, there it was, that old world, now the one and only world, right down to a robin on a leaning fencepost cocking its head at me, like, Remember me, random robin from your youth?

Based on the shirt I was wearing (red-white-and-blue peace sign in the center like a bull's-eye), I was thirteen, Clara ten (those sweet braids). The two of us were sharing, the way we did so often back then, an almost mystical feeling of sibling camaraderie as we lay there trying to discern meaningful shapes in the clouds. Then came the lovely sounds of the old neighborhood: yapping sales patter from a kitchen-window-perched radio; the cars over on Blair, more blatantly mechanical and *clank-clank-clank* than their contemporary counterparts; distant lawnmowers cross-bellowing like enraged crewcut men in dispute; locusts buzzing from positively everywhere.

All of it was so familiar, utterly dear.

And yet was happening for the first time.

Something in the quality of the light seemed to be making promises regarding our future: life would continue to be what it had always been for us, a perpetual *opening*, out and out and out. Not only would delightful new experiences keep materializing but our means of understanding and enjoying those experiences would expand as well. A thrilling new world was coming, in which adult privileges would be ours: we would drive, kiss, smoke, laugh confidently in huskier voices soon to be born mysteriously from within us.

Then the light, plus the smell of the air (loam, just-cut grass, a hint of vanilla from the Nabisco plant across the park), began communicating a second subverbal certainty: it was plain to me, lying on my back, that, of all the generations that had trod upon the earth, ours—Clara's and mine, i.e., this very one—would be the first to discover that the oppressive patterns observable everywhere around us (wars, riots, divorces, famines, strange old people whose bitterness had yellowed their teeth and warped their spines) could be disrupted. All of eternity, that is, had been leading up to this moment, when *we* would finally arrive. At last could begin the culmination of earth's tiresome history, during which, early on, countless generations of men in crude leather sandals had driven swords into other men in sandals, as the downtrodden women of the stabbed men looked on, dreading their coming ravishment, after which some slightly more sophisticated men, in leggings and cravats, had driven sabres into some other men in leggings and cravats, as their downtrodden women coughed into delicate handkerchiefs, dreading their coming ravishment, and even in good times the poor sickened, the rich feasted, men beat horses, lions ate baby gazelles, and for what? To what end? Had it all been just a pointless, random, meaningless disposition of energy?

No, not pointless, not at all: *we* were the point. All that had occurred before had been necessary to bring us about, to produce the young and healthy perfection that was *us*, our generation, so that we could finally, on behalf of all who had come before, render meaningful that brutal thing called *life on earth*.

Or so I felt, lying on my childhood lawn beside my sister, Clara.

Soon I would go inside for a drink. I knew this. I had done so back then and therefore must do so again. I was, mostly, the boy I had been that day: thirsty, sweet, self-pleased, ignorant of the future, the right side of my face slightly more sun-warmed than the left. But I was also, fractionally, the older person I was now, cringing at the thought of what he, that boy, would find inside.

Which was: Dad pummelling Mom (joyfully, playfully at first, then with increasing rancor), while Uncle Rod pummelled Dad (in an attempt to quell Dad's pummelling of Mom) and Aunt Staci also, somewhat performatively, pummelled Mom. (It was unclear what offense Mom had originally committed.) Clara had followed me in and was cowering near an upended coffee table. Now and then one of the adults would step away from the brawl to ingest more of his or her drink. It was all as confusing as it had once actually been. And yet I knew dimly that, within the hour, all would be well, Rod, Staci, Mom, and Dad restored to conviviality, gleefully flinging chairs down from the second-story deck as if to celebrate the intensity of the earlier round-robin pummelling, while Clara and I, in an attempt to reëstablish normalcy, played a terse game of Chinese checkers in the mayhemic space that was the post-pummelling living room: couch tipped on its back, several broken light bulbs lying there, like ivory eggshells out of which exotic baby birds of light had just burst, among a loose flotilla of eight or nine pink party hats, which had come from a neat, hopeful stack, a stack now jammed beneath the radiator, as if it had tried and failed to escape.

Noteworthy were the adjustments

our young minds were already making. On the first level: shame was upon us, of course—embarrassment, resentment of this mode of being, awareness that others in our peer group likely did not live in such a low and volatile milieu. On a second level, perhaps contradictorily: denial that this pummelling was odd or indicated any defect in our family. We were, that is, stretching to see this behavior as a manifestation of our parents' enviable lust for life; the other children and their non-pummelling parents were mundane squares, never moved by passion into this higher realm of uncontrollability.

We were trying this attitude on for size, one might say.

And, alas, I saw now, we were in the process of being *molded*. Pummelling would, ever after, be one of the choices available to us. Pummelling had been put on the menu, so to speak. To some, pummelling was unthinkable. To Clara and me, henceforth? Quite thinkable. We had seen these people we loved and respected engaged in it, and therefore, forevermore, pummelling would be something we ourselves might consider doing should we be placed under sufficient duress.

Because this was such a signal family event—a moment of peak emotional intensity—I would often, in the years to come, find myself waiting, as it were, for an excuse or opportunity to pummel someone, in much the same way that, I would imagine, a young person raised by virtuoso musicians might, on first finding an instrument in his hand, feel that the moment had arrived for him to begin pursuing the family business.

As for Clara, in the future, she would, more than once, find herself being pummelled and not objecting to it, in the belief (the seed of which had just been planted) that being pummelled did not mean she was unloved and, in fact, might very well mean the opposite.

It was bitter, being back here.

I could have wept for those two children, sitting still as bunnies before that ancient, long-ago-landfilled Chinese-checker board as, the supply of chairs up there having apparently been exhausted, couch cushions began raining down from the deck.

"Gerard?" I heard, and went outside to find Mrs. Dwyer in the yard, sort of, gigantic, nearly as tall as the tallest of the three oaks. A green leaf the size of a dinner plate wafted slowly earthward and landed on her shoe. She made no motion to remove it.

She had inserted, I could feel, there between my implanted scalp receptor and the Perlman pressure foot, one of those razor-thin Everton Interruption Pads.

Well, of course she had.

Otherwise, how would I be able to see and hear her so well?

"Gerard," she said. "You may have noticed that something new is happening today. That we are, in a sense, going in a somewhat different direction than usual. Are you having any issues with your session thus far?"

I said nothing, so that I might sooner return to Clara.

"Awesome," Mrs. Dwyer said, and eased the Pad back out.

Obscure details of memory once again began to present: the subtle but specific smell of the marbles from the Chinese-checker set, the feel of my pinkie in one of the holes of the game board, the sound a deck umbrella made as, having been tossed from the deck, it landed on its tip, lurched errantly toward the house, and knocked the downspout askew.

Clara and I flinched at the sound.

"They're just being stupid," I said.

"Drinking," she said.

We both knew, with absolute certainty, that we would never drink.

And yet we would, causing much misery for ourselves and others over the course of the rocky, confused decades to come.

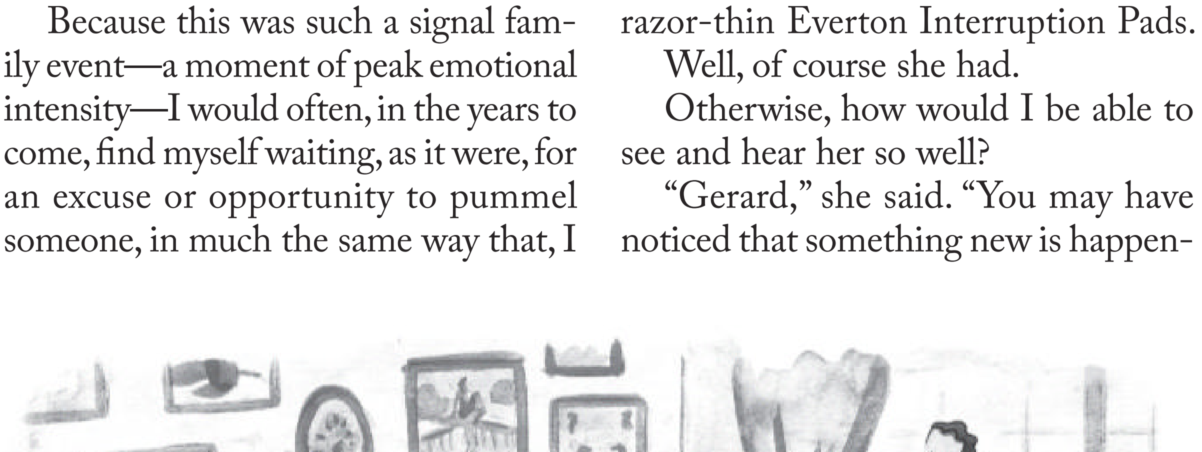
"Let's go down the basement," she said.

Which was how she always phrased it back then, the little sweetheart.

There were treasures at the bottom of the stairs: to the left, Mr. Petey, my old rocking horse, a light coating of dust on one haunch, in which I had, sometime earlier, I now recalled, lovingly traced out the words "OL' PAL." Here was the tool table, Dad's ham radio, the rack of Mom's old coats, which we briefly stood among, enjoying the odors of that bygone time, when the streets of our town had bustled with women in just such coats (brightly colored, robustly belted), their hair piled high, lipstick vivid, women who, though ostensibly submissive, exuded a dominative, flirtatious optimism.

Everywhere were forgotten wonders: a button on one of Mom's coats so lozenge-like I felt an urge to ingest it; a faded Yosemite travel pennant with a black spot situated near the bottom of El Capitan that looked, if one squinted, like a cave, but was actually a piece of tarlike gum or putty; a cluster of umbrellas roped together in a corner, near the old crank-style telephone, whose casing of grained wood made it seem like a piece of fine furniture.

Then something happened.



"Oh, look, another thing for the inevitable estate sale."

I experienced it as a click of the kind that occurs sometimes with the jaw, only it ran down the length of my spine. I turned to Clara. Had she also felt it?

She was gone.

I was wearing a different shirt.

Throughout the basement, a slight but universal rearrangement had occurred. Things were inches away from where they had just been; were overturned now, slightly off-kilter, or missing altogether. Half the Ping-Pong table was inexplicably folded up.

Outside, it was winter. Mr. Gleason shovelled next door, under a cerulean sky that was clear in the way a sky is clear only in the deepest cold. (The ground-level window through which I was viewing him had lost a thin, diagonal crack that had been visible in it only moments before.)

And, strangely, here on the game shelf was the very Chinese-checkers set that Clara and I had just been playing with upstairs, only now the lid was not warped and held on with two green rubber bands but seemingly brand-new.

Nearby was a standing mirror. In it, I was small, smaller—maybe six. No longer thirteen but six. Then I remembered: I had once, when about that age, come down here to say goodbye to Mr. Petey, whom Mom had just that morning pronounced me too old to ride. (The dust into which “OL’ PAL” would soon be inscribed had not yet, at this point, gathered upon his haunch.)

Something was amiss. These immersions were always tightly time-confined within a continuous one-hour window. One dropped in, lived that hour, came back out as the meds wore off. One never found oneself leaping forward or backward into some noncontiguous time interval.

Which, it appeared, I had just done.

Specifically, a seven-year backward leap.

But that wasn’t all.

Something else was strange, though I found myself unable to say exactly what.

I called out to Mrs. Dwyer.

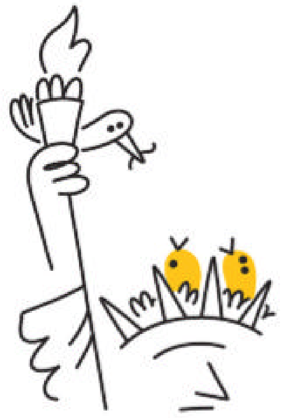
What a touchingly high voice I had.

“What’s that, David?” Mom yelled from upstairs. “Geez, say goodbye, then come up. It’s not like he’s a real horse, goof.”

David? I wondered. Who’s David?

My God, was I ever *there*. Where? Well, *here*. In the here and now. In the current sadness. Heartsick that Mr. Petey would have to live out the rest of his life in this basement, unridden among the relics. I would never forget him, I assured him. I would be right upstairs if he ever needed me. He should just whinny.

Then again, I was *six*. Did I really still want this baby toy in my room?



Mr. Petey looked up sadly.

Baby toy? he thought. (That is, I had him think, back then.)

Sorry, old paint, I thought.

No, I get it, pard, he thought back. Look, you’d best mosey along. Don’t worry about me. I’ll just be down here with the rats.

We had some good times, though, didn’t we? I thought. And who knows? Maybe I’ll come visit sometimes.

For a little ride? he thought, ruefully.

Both of us knew this would never happen, nor should it.

Humming, the little boy I had been began wandering around that January basement, inspecting a fistful of wooden shims in a dried-out caulk bucket, the shovel portion of an old snow shovel connected by a length of twisted duct tape to its former handle, a length of rebar, a perfectly good pane of glass, considering whether any of these might prove useful for the fort, the fort he’d planned to build all last summer but had never even begun.

The pummelling? Had never happened. Had not yet happened. He had no idea that such a thing could happen. Ditto the many pummellings that would follow that first one, the revelation that his mother had been cheating with his father’s brother, Uncle Rod, the shouting fights at restaurants and school recitals, the separation, the divorce, the succession of neo-partners both parents would plod joylessly through in a series of dangerous-feeling, underfurnished apartments, all culminating in an explosive final brawl at his own second wedding (to Jolene, of the piled-up dark hair, the snoring, the lovely singing voice), after which nearly thirty years would pass before he would deign to speak to his mother, and after which he never spoke to his father again.

A feeling of distance began to insert itself between the boy and me. I felt myself slipping out of the Memory Body, being more or less dragged upstairs as I grew several sizes, such that the house became a rigid squarish cloak around my shoulders, my head popped out of the chimney, and the rigid cloak became a scratchy clinic blanket.

Here was Mrs. Dwyer, offering me a Coke, which I’d pre-chosen as my Post-Session Drink / Snack.

The Interruption Pad was in—I could feel it.

“Horace is here, Gerard,” she said. “You know Horace, right?”

I did know Horace. When Horace wasn’t around, Mrs. Dwyer sometimes referred to him as her “special tech weenie.”

“What just happened, from your perspective?” Horace said. “Hi, Gerard, by the way.”

I held one finger up, as in: Hang on, I find myself somewhat trapped between two worlds.

I took a sip of the Coke, then conveyed to them as much as I could: Something was amiss. This immersion had not been tightly time-confined within the usual continuous one-hour window. Not at all. Rather, I had started at thirteen, then leapt backward into a noncontiguous time interval some seven years earlier, and was, hence, six, there at the end, six years old.

I had still enjoyed it, but it had been a little strange.

“So that’s good, right?” Mrs. Dwyer said to Horace.

“Yes and no,” said Horace, pulling a screwdriver from his back pocket. He then uncapped my Perlman and shone his little flashlight down into it.

“Moving nicely around in time, seems like,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

“Albeit in the wrong direction,” Horace said.

“Questions, Gerard, additional concerns?” said Mrs. Dwyer.

Now that the fog was lifting, I found that, yes, I did have an additional concern, a rather significant one: I had no sister. Never had. I was an only child. I grew up not in a suburban house on "Plymouth Street" but on a farm in northern Minnesota. A wheat farm, a sprawling wheat farm. In a tidy little farmhouse built on a solid slab, i.e., no basement. I had no Uncle Rod, no Aunt Staci. My parents, both only children themselves, were ministers, exceedingly gentle ministers, who framed every picture I drew, incorporated my child-thoughts into their sermons, eschewed alcohol entirely, had never raised a hand to each other. Never had there been the slightest hint of a falling-out between them, or between us, and, in fact, I'd travelled back to Anslip on two occasions to help first Father, then Mother, pass into the next world—experiences, separated by a decade, that I counted among the most profound of my life, during which I had grown even closer to the parent from whom I was parting and ever more grateful to have been a member of that loving, dignified, forthright family.

"Uh-oh," Mrs. Dwyer said. "Somebody's onto us."

She said it playfully but in her eyes was a touch of panic.

NAUSICAÄ

I can see your room only with my eyes closed now—
that's how little I understand anything at all—and you
sitting up as I entered, and in one motion you throwing
off your nightgown, cornflowers and flannel, and the moment
catching your hair's wildness in an insolent shrug,
and then I was Odysseus naked before Nausicaä—but no
you were naked—I was merely doomed, and I moved
as into the twilight of a cave, like a man loving his own
ruin, happy for his wounds and happy for the wounds
to come. Maybe a spark jumped, but there is no name
for the god of fragments—there was just a fire I believed in.
And there is still a fire that I believe in. Like the nymph,
incandescent in the glade, from whom the man should have
run in terror instead of begging her to renounce her
godliness in the name of carnal love. Still, there were
old men once in their robes and togas who were wise and
famously schooled by a woman, and they told us that
everything here is a shadow of something else—like a song
plucked on strings that implies two bodies dancing in an
ecstasy beyond all earthly knowing. Where is your bed
now? Your prodigal body that whole polities might worship?
In what world? That is what I am asking, love. What world?

—Frank X. Gaspar

I'd come here, as I did every Thursday, for my usual, so to speak: to see Mother and Father as they had been, to bask once more in their love, to feel their fond, unconditional acceptance, to be young again, deeply immersed in one of those sacred early days on the farm—sunbeams slanting in through the wrecked roof of the old barn, the smell of breakfast cooking in the house slightly agitating the chickens outside, the antique post-office bench (salvaged and repainted by Father) gleaming with dew out there at the perfectly linear wheat-field/lawn boundary. What a dream, to be immersed again in the dear minutiae of the farmhouse itself: the pale-green Princess phone, a certain paw-shaped dog dish, the sound of the Minneapolis Children's Choir on the record player, the way that, as a young child, I would pad through the house to flip the record over as soon as I heard the *wop-wop-wop* indicating that the needle had reached the end.

I had experienced none of this.

Instead I had been subjected to the memories of a person entirely unknown to me.

"We possibly skipped a step," said Mrs. Dwyer.

"The one of asking your permission," said Horace.

"Which, by rights, we should have done," said Mrs. Dwyer.

"That's on us," said Horace.

"Gerard, finish your Coke, please," Mrs. Dwyer said. "Clearly, we owe you an explanation."

Trying to collect my thoughts, I took a sip of the Coke.

Coke, gosh.

Even now, a Coke was a bit of a guilty pleasure. Mother and Father had never allowed Coke in the farmhouse. It rotted the teeth, they felt, and initiated a habit of craving, which might color a young person's expectations of life, causing him to feel that happiness must consist of always getting what one wanted, whereas true happiness lay in the knowledge that God was within one always, nothing additional required.

We sometimes prayed on this as a family, asking the Almighty to aid in our discernment as we worked to exclude from our lives anything that might obstruct our relation to Him.

And yet, when I was growing up out there, on what was known, geologically, as the Hunter Uplift, no neighbor within thirty miles, Coke seemed a harbinger of a dazzling new space-age life, a life less tedious and agricultural. Because forbidden, Coke was alluring. Coke, back then, seemed like something a young person might need to know a little something about. If a Coke was on the blue table, I'd reach up, palm the can, pretending to be a grownup about to pick it up. And Coke tasted amazing! Like a drink that bites you back, Mom would say, sneaking me a tiny sip, matching my tiny sip with a long slurp from her drink.

Her alcohol drink.

Cheers, kiddo, she'd slur. Seed the day.

Those were wild times back then. Wild, scary, uncontrolled—

Wait, wait.

Back when?

Back where? There had never been a Coke on any table in our farmhouse, not ever, not once.

No table of ours had ever been blue.

Mother had never slurped, nor slurred.

"Gerard, forgive us," Mrs. Dwyer said. "There's some urgency here."

"We turn to you in our hour of need," said Horace.

"Equipped with your implants and all, you have capabilities we simply don't," said Mrs. Dwyer.

She was, I noted, holding the Interruption Pad, which, apparently, she'd eased out.

A sheer curtain blew in and popped, blew in and popped. I was standing on a chair, at a blue table. Out a second-story window: red brick apartment buildings as far as the eye could see. On clotheslines strung between them danced the garments of our fellow-poor, flailing about in the wind, as if to say, Yes, though we are the clothes of the poor, we dance, and what of it? A shirt threw an arm up merrily. A pair of boxers inverted itself in joy, leg holes briefly opening upward.

In their bedroom, Mom and Dad had the cans of Crazy Foam out and were mock-fighting. Why did they play so rough and seem to like it? Someone was going to have to clean all that Foam up. When they played rough like this, I felt left out. There was something alarming about the way they would sometimes, in the midst of wrestling, pause to have a fierce, grinding whisper. And I had to stand there, waiting for them to remember that I was the main thing.

This was not Plymouth Street but an earlier, smaller apartment, where we lived when Clara was born.

I was therefore three, maybe two.

Now, seen through the popping curtains, the Interruption Pad rose, hovering among the dozens of flailing clotheslines, while down in the small, grassless rectangle that was the Mastrianis' back yard (sun-scorched in summer, I recalled, a rippling blue, bubble-laced ice field in winter) stood Horace, growing several feet a second, until he was gazing in at me through the window.

"Hey, champ," he said.

The walls of the apartment fell away. The world was briefly made entirely of khaki (khaki clothes hung on khaki clotheslines under a cluster of drifting khaki clouds), which gradually resolved into the gentle khaki swell of one leg of my trousers.

There on my lap tray was the Coke (briefly khaki, then not).

"So, Gerard," Horace said. "Any further temporal leaping happening?"

"If so, in what direction?" said Mrs. Dwyer.

"Were you getting older or younger?" said Horace.

"Younger," I said.

"Interesting," said Horace.

"Damn it," said Mrs. Dwyer.

Unbidden, apropos of nothing, like the last shack from a destroyed village that floats past at the end of a flood, came a final memory: in the midst of one of the fierce, grinding sessions, the white metal cabinet in the kitchen, in which the cereal boxes were kept (boxes embossed with exquisitely colored cartoons of talking tigers and toucans), had come crashing down, causing toddler-me to skedaddle, which elicited howls of tipsy laughter from Mom and Dad.

"Gerard," Horace said, "let us, if we may, say a single word to you."

A few weeks after the cabinet crashed, Clara was born and they let me hold her.

"Clara," Mrs. Dwyer said.

"Does that name mean anything to you?" Horace said.

"My sister," I said.

"Whom you loved," said Horace.

I did love her. And missed her. Or, I should say, through every instant of all that I had just been compelled to remember had run a quiet, pervasive feeling of missing Clara, someone who, when all was said and done, had loved me more purely and disinterestedly than anyone I'd ever known.

"Any idea where she is now?" said Mrs. Dwyer.

"No," I said.

But suddenly I very much wanted to know.

It wasn't like her to just disappear. Or was it? I actually wasn't sure. It hadn't been like her as a child. But, in terms of what she was like later? I was drawing a bit of a blank. Which was odd. To not know where one's sister was? Or what she had been like, after a certain point?

Didn't seem like being a very good brother.

"Unfortunately, no one knows," said Mrs. Dwyer. "She just up and vanished one day. A mother of four. Left a note but no forwarding address."

"Which is where you come in, Gerard," Horace said. "David Marker died last April. Somewhere in there, in his brain, would have been, or still is, we assume, some possible residual knowledge of his sister's whereabouts."

Horace had glanced, as he said this, at a waist-high closet back near a bin labelled "Only Soiled Linen."

"Well, not his 'brain,' exactly," Mrs. Dwyer said. "That makes it sound weird."

"Relevant portions of it," said Horace. "All legally obtained, by the way."

"How it works, Gerard," said Mrs. Dwyer, "is, it's on a sort of direct beam. Into your Perlman. Basically a Q-diffractor. We also installed a Speyer Focusser the last time you were in."

"Probably should have mentioned that as well," said Horace.

"We know this is a lot to process," said Mrs. Dwyer.

It was.

"Why do we care so much?" said Horace. "You may be wondering."

"O.K., full disclosure, Gerard," Mrs. Dwyer said. "Clara is my grandmother."

"Also full disclosure?" said Horace. "I'm in love with Rita."

Mrs. Dwyer blushed, as in, Yes, we're in love, and what a strange and beautiful thing, to have worked side by side uneventfully all these years and then, wow, *boom*.

Horace was also blushing, either because he'd just revealed his love for Mrs. Dwyer or because he'd admitted to having parts of David Marker's brain over there in that little closet.

"I was so lonely after Mr. Dwyer passed," Mrs. Dwyer said. "I thought my life was over. And now, such bounty."

"We just can't bear the thought of bringing our baby into this world knowing that somewhere he or she has a great-grandma she or he's never going to get the blessing of having the chance to learn from," Horace said.

"We were close, Grandma Clara and

me, when I was little," said Mrs. Dwyer. "If we can just somehow get you to get older, as David, the cool thing is you'll likely meet me, as a kid. Isn't that crazy? I love that."

"Wow, holy shit, just flashed on it, it's so obvious," Horace said, dropping to his knees, crawling triumphantly into the little closet.

Why me? Why, of all their clients, had they chosen me?

Well, I thought I knew why: I was old. Old and lonely. I left my small apartment only to come here for these treatments or go to the market. I was tired, frail, had no joy. What new thing could ever happen to me? I just clanked around dully in the dissolving machinery of my body, farting pretty much continuously, largely unaware of it, because, in addition to going deaf, I had become forgetful and often neglected to put my hearing aids in.

I had once owned a small business, translating Christian texts into foreign languages, had travelled widely in Europe and Asia, had been, for a time, friends with a local television personality, used to dash up flights of stairs to meet colleagues for dinner, had happily picked up many a tab.

But that was not my life now.

Now I lived for these Thursdays, on which I might briefly feel somewhat alive again.

Knowing this, Horace and Mrs. Dwyer must have considered me unlikely to object.

This was hurtful. I was, though old, still a person, and should have been asked.

"I would like to go home," I said.

"And we are totally going to make that happen," Mrs. Dwyer said. "In just a bit. Horace, are we good?"

"Give it a shot," Horace said from inside the closet.

At which time Mrs. Dwyer yanked out my Interruption Pad.

And I found myself remembering. Remembering mountains. When driving in mountains, a guy needed to keep his eye on the engine temp. So Dad had said. The air smelled of pine, wood smoke, motor oil. That, over there? Denver. Wow, I was approaching Denver. For the first time ever. Going, like, eighty. How did far-off lights even twinkle like that? On the gearshift jangled a stacked sheath of six hippie bracelets Clara had left behind when she fled the state with her dealer, the brutal Jeff Picks. I was off to find her, in the Torino, the Torino gifted to Mom by one of her lovers, either Steve B. or Derek, a total piece of crap she'd passed on to me the minute it started needing repairs and thereafter always referred to as "that sweet ride I bought you."

"Gerard!" Horace called from a rest area thronged with idling trucks. "You're getting older now, yes?"

Despite myself I must have nodded.

"Where's Clara?" Mrs. Dwyer shouted, her face looking manic on a passing billboard, seen through some lightly falling snow. "Focus on that!"

Here came the click again, that jaw-click down my spine.

I was sitting splay-legged on a berm. Office-park berm. Spread out across the berm were the pages of my résumé, fresh from the copy shop, pages that just needed to be put into the right order and the job would be mine, if only the wind would die down and I could somehow become less buzzed.

Judging by my hair, through which I now ran a hand, I was thirty-five, thirty-six?

Did I know where Clara was? At that moment? I did. Living over on Ninth Street in that shit-box rental with her three kids, real stinkers all: they mocked her, hid her glasses, dropped weird shit in her food, mimed the way she walked after she'd had a few. Last time I'd seen her, down at the Aero, she was in rough shape: just fired from Sam's Club for drinking while greeting, bugging me for a loan so she could go to (get this) rehab.

Ha, fat chance, what did I look like, a sap?

Two of the pages kite-skimmed off the berm, went airborne, vanished into the early-May leaves of some distant trees.

Great. Perfect. Shit.

So much for that job.

Then onward into middle age and the many disappointing failures there.

Jesus God, the number of low taverns, parking lots, and public spaces in which I had pummelled someone or been pummelled; the variety of bleak strip malls in which, too old for it, I had worked some food-service gig, wearing a paper hat; the number of times that, in such places, my anger at being underestimated by a boss had led me to shove that ass-wipe into a grill or a deep fryer, spray-paint a dick on his truck, or spread a vicious false rumor about him among our much younger co-workers.

The clicks, coming fast now, merged into a maddening spinal hum.

Three wives, two kids, all of whom had broken off contact with me; on welfare, bragging because briefly off welfare, on welfare again; in the mirror, a big red nose and a bulging gut, from all the drinking; but if anybody felt like judging me (David), such as, for example, him (Gerard), I (David) might just point out, all due respect, that he (Gerard) had always been cautious to a fault, prim in aspect, had managed to push away, with his brittle sanctimony, anyone who'd ever entertained any idea of getting close to him.

Well, wait a minute.

Mother and Father had, it was true, loomed large in my (Gerard's) mind whenever I'd met a young lady. Sometimes she would be dressed too suggestively or prove too harsh in her speech; one might find oneself wincing at her table manners. I may have been from Anslip, but we knew how to comport ourselves at table. This was, in a sense, a form of Christian love: to know how to behave in order to put others at ease. As opposed to holding one's fork like a cudgel, à la Rosalie Swanson. To wad up one's napkin at the beginning of a meal and leave it sitting there on the table throughout, as the otherwise appealing Beth Lancer had done that fateful Thanksgiving? Raised the question of what it might be like to spend one's life with someone so heedless and disordered, especially should, God willing, children enter the picture. And then there was the closest call of all, Emma Beam, a midlife companion (kind, warm, well read) who'd ultimately proved unsuitable in light of the coarse, cackling laugh she would emit whenever one tried speaking in earnest to her about important matters of the spirit.

Friendships had, likewise, been difficult: Marco, the local television personality, whose inability to return my phone messages in a timely manner—a result, I felt, of the arrogance related to his (very mild) "fame"—caused me, ultimately, to end our acquaintance; Eric, a former employee and an agnostic, who repeatedly rebuffed me when I invited him and his young family to our church, then quit the company in a huff simply because, in a gesture of friendship, as his marriage was ending, I suggested that it might have been his very failure to bring God into his family that had doomed it.

Huh.

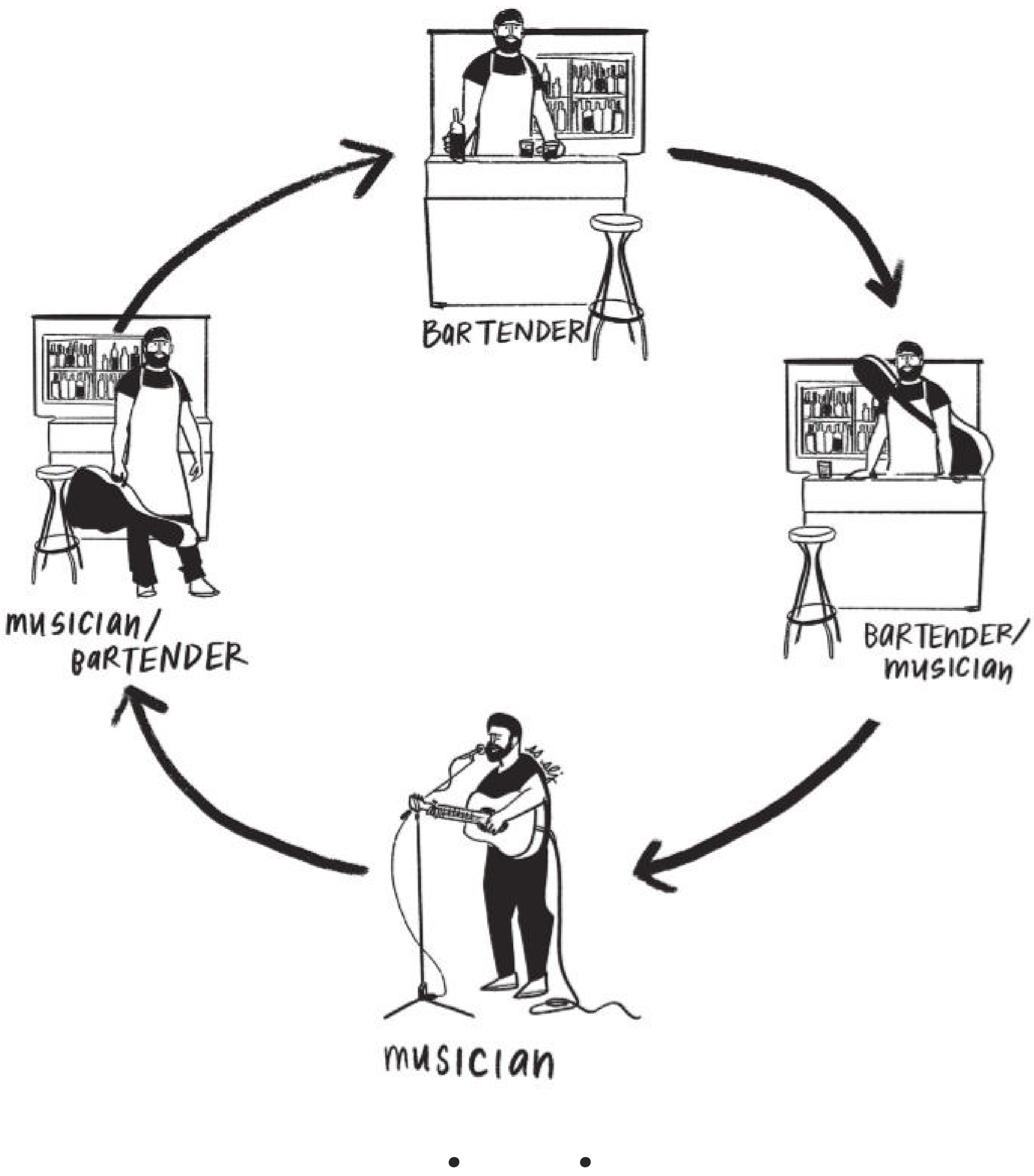
What a strange, uncomfortable thrill it was, being judged from within by someone not oneself, someone crude, bold, obstreperous, obnoxious, forever on the verge of pummelling someone, with a booming laugh and a habit of standing too close to the person he was willfully deriding, someone who smoked, drank, and always gunned the engine of his car twice, loudly, before driving off, someone who, nevertheless, saw one with startling acuity, and communicated quite convincingly his unequivocal conclusion that—

Well, that one had been a prig, all one's life.

A cautious, judgmental prig.

Superior, cold, aloof, impossible to love, hence friendless in old age.

Goodness.



Horace must now have turned some dial to its endmost point. I felt myself abruptly propelled forward through a series of discrete late-life memory clusters: all the diner countertops at which I (David) had sat during those final years; every arrowhead-shaped silver cloud at which I'd gazed up; all the dogs who, walking by, had swung their heads affably back to watch me pass; my last apartment, the Lee Street dump, its front gutter hanging down the day I moved in, still hanging down the day I—

Ah, yes, Lee Street was the place I would die; it was my death apartment.

I was in bed, in pain, in quite a lot of pain, all the chub having recently fallen right off. I was, yes, hoo boy, dying, while looking for something, something dear to me. One hand pawing around the rumpled sheets, I found it—a note, on a purple piece of stationery, which I'd been hanging on to for many years now, from Clara, this address on the envelope: 138 Shallow Pond Lane, Dunbar, N.Y.

In the note, a request that I destroy the note and not tell anyone that I'd heard from her, not even her kids. Especially not her kids. Or her grandkids. They'd tell Lewis. They were somehow all in cahoots with Lewis. Lewis had them eating out of his hand. That sneaky turd never laid a finger on her if the kids or grandkids were around.

So: No telling. Anybody. Ever. That's your part, D. You have to promise.

Since she'd come out here, it'd been nothing but good. She'd never felt so free, so happy. All she did was take walks down by the lake, say her prayers, go to meetings, write in this funky diary she'd bought. No stress, no chaos. Her job was a piece of cake. Yeah, she'd found a little job. At a candle store. The simple things, so good, so good.

Was Clara, as of today, the day of my death, still alive, in that place, Dunbar, to which she'd fled years ago?

She was.

Had she ever written to me again?

Every Christmas. ("All still good," one card had said. "Still finding life a blessing," said another.)

Had she ever, in all those years, released me from my promise?

No.

Asked me to visit?

Never once.

The hospice nurse came in, the look on her face saying, Lord, Mr. Marker, your time is nigh. Then she became Horace, bearing a tiny body bag. Which morphed into his fanny pack, from which he withdrew a notebook. The sun slipped out from behind a cloud, causing the tree-shaped dancing shadows on the rug to vanish, even as the rug divided itself into the discolored Italianate tiles of Treatment Room 4.

Mrs. Dwyer, Interruption Pad in hand, was looking down at me like I was a Christmas gift she meant to unwrap.

"And?" she said gleefully.

It occurred to me, to us, to David and me, to be quiet, appear stunned.

So stunned by what we had just experienced that we literally had nothing to say.

"Um, O.K.," Mrs. Dwyer said.

"Nothing?" said Horace. "Nothing at all?"

Sorry, sorry, I told them. It had all been a blur. I'd seen David's death, yes. Wow, had I. Death: gosh, geez, terrible. But sadly, if he had ever known where she'd gone, he'd forgotten by then. And, actually, at the moment of death, one is not thinking of such things. One is not really even a person anymore but, rather, a frightened animal, drawn inexorably toward that which one fears most.

"Huh," said Mrs. Dwyer.

"Why do we not quite believe you?" said Horace.

They'd find somebody else. They would. So many people came in here: old people, poor people, bored people, lonely people, people just ripe for this sort of thing.

All I had to do now was hold steady, continue to appear clueless.

I reached for the empty Coke, tried to drink from it, shook the can around as if shaking it might miraculously refill it.

"Oh, well," Mrs. Dwyer said. "Worth a try, I guess."

"Gerard, what was done to you, by us?" Horace said. "Was wrong. We see that now."

"Clearly, we made just a ton of mistakes in here today," said Mrs. Dwyer.

"It would mean a lot to us to part as friends," said Horace.

By which they meant: How about don't rat us out?

For a retreating enemy, Father always said, build a golden bridge.

I indicated that although I would be happy enough to consider the matter closed, I felt, unfortunately, that, in the future, I must pursue these treatments in a different Center, perhaps the one over in the Peltham Mall.

"Fair enough," said Mrs. Dwyer.

"I know those guys over there," Horace said. "Tell Eric I said hi."

With that, Mrs. Dwyer unseated my Perlman foot.

And they let me go.

Outside, I sat a moment in my ancient Dart.

What a day.

Across the parking lot were the closed-down casino and the defunct Arthur Treacher's.

I found myself thinking of Clara.

Who was she? Who was she to me, really?

To me (David), she was someone who had always been either on something or promising to quit something, either praising to the sky the latest big but surprisingly gentle guy recently kicked out of the Marines for no reason or claiming that she hadn't seen it coming when that fat son of a bitch suddenly started accusing her of wiretapping his landline. She was, in truth, someone I, mired in my own battles, had lost track of years ago.

To me (Gerard), had I ever met her, she would have seemed a highly problematic individual; my over-developed sense of preëmptive offended caution would have caused me to shun her. (She chewed with her mouth open, listened to "classic rock," nose-snorted when she laughed.) I had never been comfortable around such people. Such people, although they were, yes, of course, children of God, were best kept at arm's length, for their sake and for one's own.

Still, if a person didn't wish to be found, we felt, she should not be.

And Mrs. Dwyer and Horace would be coming for her soon.

For all their dreamy yapping, they were brats, entitled brats, with the mindless vigor of youth, who wanted what they wanted so strongly and with such a presumption of eternal innocence that it would never occur to them that a thing they strongly felt like doing might be better left undone.

I drove the two hours west to Dunbar. There, parked in front of the little duplex at 138 Shallow Pond Lane, I wrote a note, explaining to Clara, as well as I could, all that had happened. If she wished to reconnect with Rita, her granddaughter, I said, I could arrange it. If not, I suggested she leave this address and go somewhere new, quickly, somewhere that would have meant nothing to David, that would have been nowhere in his mind at or around the time of his death, a place, ideally, that he'd never even heard of.

I pushed open the mail slot, dropped the note in. As I did, there came from inside the unmistakable smell of her: her perfume, her clothes, the foods she liked to cook.

Gosh.

Then, up the sidewalk, here she came: a handsome woman in her mid- to late seventies, tall, pretty but hunched, somewhat Earth Motherish in aspect. Not breaking stride, she arranged her long red-gray hair into two pert braids, left first, then right.

That was her, that was Clara to a tee. She'd been doing that move since fifth grade.

Now she caught sight of me. I knew what I looked like: Gerard. And had no wish to alarm her.

But, also, David was there within me, even still.

Could she see it?

I would have to talk fast: ask her to step inside, read the note, while I waited respectfully on the porch. Soon, she would come out. I could just imagine the look she'd have, then, on her face. I'd seen it many times before, a look that said, Are you messing with me right now, brother?

But I would not be. I would not be messing with her. I would be, as David might have put it, "serious as a heart attack." I would have much to tell her. For the first time in my (David's) life, I would have the means to tell her, really tell her, how I felt, equipped, as I would be, with his (Gerard's) words, his inexplicable self-confidence. I (Gerard) would have what I sorely needed: a pal, a platonic confidante, someone I might, because of our long history with her, at least be somewhat able to tolerate. I (David) would have his (Gerard's) body, a precious, life-filled body that, though old, still promised some number of good days ahead.

It was really something.

The sun was dropping. From the shore of the lake came the singing of happy children. That singing might have come from any time, any place at all. Life (I felt, we felt) could hardly be sad, or over, if such sounds were still being made, and if, up a sidewalk, there could still come someone we had held dear for many years, who might, in what time was left, become both our sister for the first time and our sister again. ♦

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George Saunders on the nature of mind.

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

BORDER CONTROL

The economics of immigration vs. the politics of immigration.

BY IDREES KAHLOON

On October 5, 1908, a hammy melodrama made its début in Washington, D.C.: Israel Zangwill's "The Melting-Pot," a four-act play that introduced the dominant metaphor for the American immigrant experience. The plot is thin—a New York tenement romance threatened by an Old World blood feud is mended by the salvific power of patriotism. Mostly, it's a pretext for pontificating about a new American religion. "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!" the protagonist, a struggling Jewish composer named David Quixano, proclaims. "What is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labour and look forward!"

The critics were mainly contemptuous. "Sentimental trash masquerading as a human document," the New York *Times* judged. Across the Atlantic, the *Times* of London declared the play's "rhapsodising over music and crucibles and statues of liberty" to be "romantic claptrap." But when President Theodore Roosevelt attended the première he was utterly smitten. ("That's a great play, Mr. Zangwill, that's a great play!" he is

The limits of immigration are set not by economics but by political psychology—by backlash unconcerned with net benefits.

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

said to have shouted.) The vivid allegory—of "souls melting in the Crucible" and divine fires purging inherited rivalries—imprinted something indelible on the American psyche.

The play arrived during a heyday of immigration. Ellis Island was at peak capacity, accepting nineteen hundred newcomers a day; one in seven Americans was foreign-born. Although plenty of native-born Americans were troubled, Zangwill's openhearted sentiments spoke to many others. Yet only a few years later the play's hopefulness seemed dated and out of step. The First World War heightened suspicion of foreigners, who competed for jobs (maybe harboring unionist sympathies?) and dressed and spoke oddly (maybe never planning to assimilate?). In 1924, the *Times* published a screed complaining that "the melting pot, besides having its own color, begins to give out its own smell. Its reek fills New York and floats out rather widely in all directions." The same year, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act, which set extremely low quotas on total immigration and barred people from Asia. For the next four decades, the great, godly smelting machines would largely sit idle.

Alongside that history of xenophobia, of course, is a civic creed that we teach schoolchildren and roll out for public ceremonies—the one that declares America to be a "nation of immigrants," even if the melting-pot metaphor has been replaced with kaleidoscopes, mosaics, and salad bowls (plus a rueful acknowledgment of those whose arrival was a matter of abduction and slavery). We might exult in the economic advantages we owe to immigration, through both ordinary population growth and extraordinary entrepreneurship—then Andrew Carnegie, titan of steel, now Sundar Pichai, titan of search. The fact remains that mass migration and nativist backlash have stalked one another for more than a century. However enthusiastic the American dogma may be about immigrants past, rising migration levels invariably trigger the fear that immigrants present and future may be something different—a drag on the welfare state, a threat to native laborers, a pox on the culture.

The politics of immigration have always made for strange bedfellows. Free-trading Ayn Rand acolytes join with cosmopolitan social-justice progressives in encouraging more migration. Cultural conservatives join with old-guard trade unionists in opposition. Sorting through the thicket of questions—economic, political, and philosophical—posed by immigration has always been difficult. But those questions have gained urgency as the cycle now repeats itself. The percentage of foreign-born Americans is currently at a level last seen a century ago, and it continues to rise. Today, the Know-Nothing Party of the mid-nineteenth century has been reborn in the contemporary G.O.P.; the America First movement, once championed by the aviator Charles Lindbergh, has a new avatar in Donald Trump. Joe Biden's policies to stanch unauthorized migration across the southern border, meanwhile, suggest Trumpism with a human face. And, in New York City, behind Lady Liberty's back, Mayor Eric Adams is busing unwanted migrants to Canada.

Our present-day paroxysms can be traced to the reopening of America's borders in the mid-twentieth century. This time, the arrivals were mainly non-Europeans. The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 allowed migration from Asia once more; guest-worker programs greatly increased the United States' Hispanic population; a diversity-lottery program that was started in 1990 helped enable sizable emigration from Africa. At the same time, demand for immigration far outstripped the number of available visas. Familial preferences in immigration applications meant that an individual entrant could effectively relocate an entire clan. This feature, sometimes derided as "chain migration," is rather dear to me. My uncle, an adventurous doctor from a small Punjabi village near Sialkot, Pakistan, moved to West Virginia in 1971. As a result, all eleven of his siblings—including, in Gabriel García Márquez style, six brothers who all had the first name Muhammad—were able to wend their way to America. My mother, the tenth of the litter, ended up in Lexington, Kentucky, where I was born in 1994. With a few substitutions of place and date, many Americans can tell some variant of this tale.

What has all this global movement actually done to America? The political arguments are harder to answer than the economic ones. Although the dismal science is rife with disagreement on many topics—from microeconomists butting heads about the irrationality of human preferences to macroeconomists arguing about how to quell inflation—there is a broad consensus that immigration is largely beneficial to migrants and their hosts alike. In 2017, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine released a mammoth report titled "The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration." It found that, although immigrants tend to earn less than native-born workers and are therefore a bit more costly to governments, their children exhibit unusually high levels of upward mobility and "are among the strongest economic and fiscal contributors in the population." For a country with an aging labor force, like the U.S., immigration can act like Botox for the welfare state, temporarily making the math of paying for promised benefits, like Social Security and Medicare, less daunting. (Eventually, age comes for the immigrants, too.)

A breezy but powerful case for the consensus view is made in "Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success" (Public Affairs), by Ran Abramitzky and Leah Boustan, professors of economics at Stanford and Princeton, respectively. Many of their arguments come from their analysis of a fascinating big-data set—genealogical records collected by Ancestry.com. (When the researchers started gathering the site's data with an Internet scraper, its lawyers sent a cease-and-desist letter.) Seeing the long-run benefit of immigration requires measurement "at the pace of generations, rather than years," Abramitzky and Boustan contend. In combination with detailed census records, the ancestral data debunk the idea that earlier waves of European migrants were more industrious and more culturally smeltable than contemporary migrants from elsewhere. "Newcomers today are just as quick to move up the economic ladder as in the past, and immigrants now are integrating into American culture just as surely as immigrants back then," the economists write. Unlike other big Anglo countries, such as Australia, Britain, and Canada, America lacks a points-based system that explicitly advantages the already educated and already wealthy, but Abramitzky and Boustan disagree with conservative critics who argue that we should adopt one. Their analysis of a century of immigration data finds "very few countries from which the fact of upward mobility does not hold." Even if migrants arrive poor, "one generation later their children more than pay for their parents' debts."

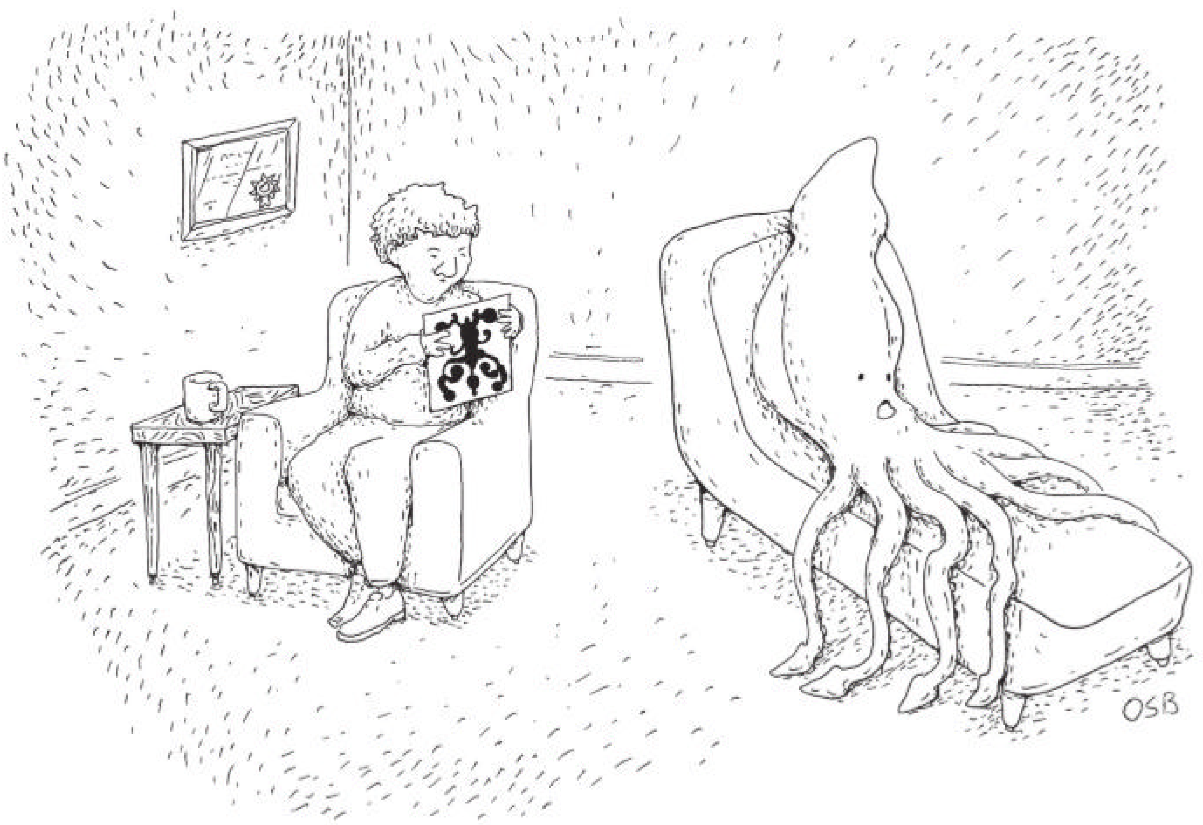
Empirical economic research has tended to affirm conclusions suggested by the discipline's first principles: the argument for the free trade of goods, dating back to Adam Smith, implies an argument for the free movement of labor. Michael Clemens, a prominent economist of immigration, maintains that present-day migration barriers are so self-defeating that they are analogous to governments leaving trillion-dollar bills on the sidewalk. The gains from looser migration, in his analysis, would be several times larger than the gains from eliminating all remaining trade barriers.

The essential question is not what size the potential windfall would be but *cui bono*—who benefits? The primary beneficiaries are the migrants themselves, who in rich countries can earn a multiple of their old wages. Their homelands can also benefit from transfers of money; remittances make up more than one-fifth of the national incomes of countries such as El Salvador, Haiti, and Honduras. But what about their host nations, who may be effectively subsidizing this global redistribution? Ecologists distinguish between interspecies relationships that are parasitic (as between tapeworms and humans) and those which are mutualistic (like the bromance between clown fish and anemones you may remember from "Finding Nemo," in which both parties benefit). In the domestic politics of immigration, restrictionists are convinced that immigrants are parasites; economists might try harder to correct that picture.

Consider winemaking, which, for pioneering economists like Adam Smith, was a favorite way of illustrating the benefits of trade. In America today, the wine industry provides employment to nearly two million people; it also provides revenue to the government by the billions (and semblances of personalities to people by the millions). At the same time, domestic winemaking is made possible by temporary guest workers, typically from Mexico, who harvest grapes—including at the winery owned by Donald Trump. Are foreign agricultural laborers hurting job prospects for hardworking Americans? Cesar Chavez, the famed organizer of the United Farm Workers, was inclined to think so; in the nineteen-seventies, he launched his so-called Illegals Campaign, encouraging union members to report undocumented workers to the authorities and to run unauthorized border patrols. In the nineteen-sixties, as it happened, the U.S. once eliminated a program for guest workers called braceros (Spanish for "those who work with their arms") at the behest of American politicians worried about domestic wages, including John F. Kennedy. Yet Clemens and his fellow-researchers found that wages for native agricultural workers didn't appear to rise in states where the suspended braceros had been most important; the farms there seemed, instead, to have accelerated their use of labor-saving machinery. Repeat the experiment today, many vignerons warn, and the whole industry would go kaput.

The most significant academic dissenter from this pro-immigration consensus is George Borjas, an economist at Harvard's Kennedy School. Borjas spies examples everywhere of immigrant workers bringing down native ones, from the ivory tower to the factory floor. (One of his best-known papers suggests that native-born mathematicians in the U.S. became less productive—as measured by their pace of generating high-impact theorems and papers—after the Soviet Union collapsed and talented Russian mathematicians flooded their departments.) Borjas has long been locked in an econometric duel with David Card, a Nobel Prize-winning economist at the University of California, Berkeley, over the consequences of an episode known as the Mariel boatlift. In 1980, Fidel Castro announced that all Cubans wishing to immigrate to America would be free to do so from the port of Mariel—as long as they could arrange their own transportation. In the course of six months, an extraordinary number of Marielitos, some hundred and twenty-five thousand refugees, arrived in Florida. The incident provided economists

"I'm assuming this coffee date covers an extension of our friendship for at least a year."



"Running away from a shark."

with a tantalizing chance to study what an acute surge of foreign workers could do to labor markets.

In 1990, Card wrote a paper concluding that "the Mariel influx appears to have had virtually no effect on the wages or unemployment rates of less-skilled workers, even among Cubans who had immigrated earlier"—despite the fact that the influx had expanded the number of available workers in the local labor market by seven per cent. This was a sensational result. In 2015, though, Borjas circulated his reappraisal of Card's findings. He argued that the right way to measure the job displacement was to look squarely at non-Hispanic, male high-school dropouts in the Miami area, who would have competed most directly with the Marielitos. Their wages, he calculated, dropped dramatically, by between ten and thirty per cent. Supporters of Card retorted that Borjas had restricted his sample so severely that he was confusing statistical noise for meaningful signal. On it went. Today, Borjas remains a maverick within the profession.

Yet even Borjas, who was born in Havana and arrived in the United States at the age of twelve, does not claim that the net effect of immigration is negative. Rather, his view is that immigration can redistribute gains "from those who compete with immigrants to those who use immigrants" in ways that can be socially disruptive. You could agree with him about the distributional concerns while also thinking that a fair government could insure that everyone was truly better off—that the winners effectively compensated the losers. But what's theoretically possible has to be tested against what's politically possible. Economists can be too impatient with such realities.

Recall the discipline's Pollyannaish embrace, in the nineteen-nineties, of less fettered trade with countries like China: such trade boosted the over-all economy, but eroded the livelihoods of millions of Americans who were exposed to import competition. The trade-adjustment assistance that was meant to compensate those workers was, in truth, a pittance, and left many Americans behind, and resentful. Not even a quarter century after Bill Clinton successfully championed a trade deal with China and that country's inclusion in the World Trade Organization, a bipartisan consensus against liberalizing trade has emerged. America's "pivot to Asia" has been hamstrung by this reality. The sweeping Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, which American officials hoped would counter Chinese influence in the East, went on after the U.S. withdrew from it—and China has now applied to be a member. Congressional politics means that the current deal the U.S. is hawking to its allies—the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework—cannot offer the benefit those allies most prize: access to American markets. A similar logic applies to both the movement of goods and the movement of people. Open the doors too hastily and they may slam shut and stay that way for a rather long time.

If the limits of immigration are bounded by political psychology rather than by economic necessity, a series of uncomfortable questions arise. What moral weight, for instance, should be accorded to the human desire for cultural continuity? Taken to an extreme, it could legitimatize the sort of ethnic separation that white nationalists aspire to when they recite their credo known as the Fourteen Words: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." A few months ago, on a drive through Silicon Valley, Ro Khanna, the congressman who represents the only majority-Asian district in the continental United States, put the balance to me this way: "People don't mind that folks are playing cricket in Fremont. They just want to make sure we have baseball, not cricket, as a national pastime."

On the other hand, there's the question of whether rich countries have Good Samaritan responsibilities to help poorer ones, perhaps especially former colonies. Is there an obligation to bequeath the perquisites of citizenship upon not just asylum seekers and refugees but also economic migrants who come without any prior authorization? Are unregulated borders consistent with sovereignty? If migration is a fire starter for reactionary populism, which may burn hot enough to endanger democracy, is restriction defensible on the ground of self-preservation? Some immigration skeptics are xenophobes; many more fear the xenophobia of others. Despite realistic fears about our compatriots' baser instincts, do we still have an ethical obligation to support open borders?

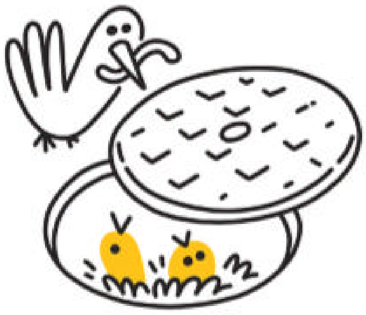
Modern political philosophers have largely found extreme limitations on people's ability to migrate to be unjustifiable. Joseph Carens, perhaps the most prominent contemporary ethicist of immigration, is a full-throated advocate for open borders. "In many ways, citizenship in Western democracies is the modern equivalent of feudal class privilege—an inherited status that greatly enhances one's life chances," he writes. If humans all have equal moral worth, how can it be fair to let the dumb luck of birth determine opportunity to such an extreme degree?

It's notable that neither John Rawls nor Robert Nozick, the past century's two greatest thinkers about the social contract, was eager to reckon with the matter of migration in his magnum opus. In "A Theory of Justice," Rawls argued that the rules ordering a just society are the ones we would agree to behind a veil of ignorance about our position in it. If the entire world could be placed behind one such veil, would it settle for the present-day system of tightly regulated borders? It seems unlikely, but Rawls dodged the issue by limiting his analysis to "closed" societies, in which migration was assumed away. In the book "Anarchy, State, and Utopia," Nozick sketched a vision for a minimalist state that prized property rights, but he did not consider the tricky business of people entering and exiting. Yet here, too, the logic may lead to openness. The minimally viable state in Nozick's utopia would be so emaciated, having ceded almost all its power to individual property owners, that it is unclear who could stop someone who sought to wed or employ an outsider. Carens takes these conundrums as evidence for his position: whatever account of political justice you adopt, it will confirm the moral necessity of open borders.

Judging by the damage that Britain willingly inflicted on itself by leaving the European Union, which requires free movement among its members—or by the far-right parties that have sprung up in Germany and the Scandinavian countries in response to surges of refugees—I would guess that most societies would be ripped apart if they even came close to implementing the program that Carens recommends. Reihan Salam, the president of the conservative Manhattan Institute, pointedly titled his book on the subject "Melting Pot or Civil War?" Even Carens is quick to clarify that he is not "making a policy proposal that I think might be adopted (in the immediate future) by presidents or prime ministers"; he concedes that "the idea of open borders is a nonstarter." But perhaps he should have the courage of his convictions: is the case for open borders obliged, morally, to reckon with its foreseeable political consequences?

In "Immigration and Democracy" (Oxford), Sarah Song, a professor of law and political science at Berkeley, offers an alternative to this depressing dialectic. "It is not an exaggeration to say that the open borders position has emerged as the dominant normative position" among her fellow political theorists, she writes. She offers calm and methodical critiques of the logic of open-borders advocates, whether they proceed from left, liberal, or libertarian foundations. If such a thing as global equality of opportunity can be conceived, open borders might not even be the best route to achieve it, she contends, because that approach "would reinforce rather than ameliorate the economic vulnerability of people in poor countries." She disputes the idea of a fundamental human right to immigrate which would require the dismantling of the world's borders.

When Song turns to constructing her own account of the state and its right to regulate movement into and out of its territory, she arrives at a middle road: "What is required is not closed borders or open borders but controlled borders and open doors." Citizenship creates a special set of commitments that can be in tension with our humanitarian, universalist commitments. You cannot believe that people have the right to collective self-determination—a core principle of international law—without also ceding them the right to regulate a polity's membership. Indeed, she writes, "part of what it means for a political community to be self-determining is that it controls whom to admit as new members." This is not, as some believe, an unquestionable right embedded in state sovereignty—which would sanction, for example, a revived Chinese Exclusion Act or the Trump Administration's so-called Muslim travel ban—because democratic norms against invidious discrimination should, she argues, constrain the state even when dealing with non-members. In some cases, like reunifying families or saving refugees, humanitarian considerations tip over into requiring admission rather than simply allowing it. What Song ends up constructing is an ethical basis for an immigration system that, with some reforms, America could plausibly achieve. A sigh of relief can be breathed.



You might wonder, as I sometimes did as a student taking classes on political theory, how much these thought exercises actually matter. Countries will continue to restrict immigration despite the opinions of professors—in exactly the same way that Vladimir Putin will continue to wage his unjust war on Ukraine no matter the protestations of just-war theorists. But political philosophy can take a long and circuitous route to practice. The great English philosopher John Locke published his "Two Treatises on Government" in 1689; a century later, it inspired Thomas Jefferson as he helped draft America's divorce letter to Britain. Karl Marx published "Das Kapital" half a century before Vladimir Lenin founded the Soviet Union. And so the intellectual contests held today may affect how future generations traverse whatever of the globe is left to them.

In the short term, it is easy to despair as nativist backlash recurs once again and borders militarize. But America today has forty-five million foreign-born residents—the most of any country, and as many as the next four combined. And Biden, loudly hawkish on unauthorized immigration, has quietly expanded the number of legal admissions, extending welcome to Ukrainians, Venezuelans, and Haitians fleeing war and chaos. Quietly, too, the economic dividends will accrue. In the U.S., opinion poll after opinion poll shows that immigrants are deeply optimistic about the course of their adopted country. Demographic transitions have often been marred by oppression and violence. If America's proceeds peacefully, it would mark success for one of the greatest experiments any democracy has ever tried, and help secure economic primacy over closed and sclerotic societies like China's. However sentimental the critics found "The Melting-Pot," its hopeful vision could yet be borne out. ♦

BOOKS

BACK FROM THE DEAD

The afterlife of Susan Taubes.

BY MERVE EMRE

Previously unpublished work casts new light on Taubes, who killed herself in 1969.

COURTESY ETHAN AND TANIA TAUBES

In Sigmund Freud's "Rat Man," a case history of a neurotic young man, there is a curious footnote about the natural uncertainty of paternity. For a man to believe that his father truly was his father, he had to accept what no evidence could corroborate. Paternity was not a physical relation, Freud explained. It was an idea that sprang, as if already fully formed, from one's mind. "The prehistoric figures which show a smaller person sitting upon the head of a larger one are representations of patrilineal descent," he wrote. "Athena had no mother, but sprang from the head of Zeus."

But Freud was wrong. Athena *did* have a mother: Metis, whom Zeus swallowed, fearing that the children she bore would be too mighty for him to govern. In some versions of the myth, Metis, while pregnant inside Zeus, made her daughter a breastplate, which Athena eventually adorned with the decapitated head of the gorgon Medusa, whose eyes held the power to turn anyone who looked upon her into stone. "To decapitate = to castrate," Freud wrote elsewhere. Had he put the two heads together, he might have wondered at the paradox they presented: that the fierce and divine female child could symbolize both the extension of the patriarch's authority and its undoing.

Susan Taubes's novel "Divorcing" (1969) begins with a report in *France-Soir* of a *femme décapitée*, a woman whose head was cut clean off when she was hit by a car in the Eighteenth Arrondissement of Paris. The woman, Sophie Blind, is, like Taubes, the daughter of a psychoanalyst, the granddaughter of a rabbi, and the estranged wife of a scholar and a rabbi. She is also the mother of mostly male children, and the lover of Gaston, Roland, Alain, Nicholas, and Ivan. In flight from her married life in New York, she has just moved to Paris with her children. She is killed before she has a chance to finish arranging the furniture in her new apartment.

In life, Sophie's mind and her body were beholden to men. In death, her severed head is free to wander backward through her life in a series of surreal images. Her head can detach from the first-person point of view and float into omniscience. It can leap across time and space: to her marriage in New York, to her melancholy childhood in Budapest. It can fantasize about her funerals—there are at least two—or imagine her dead body on a dissection table, "the four limbs together, the skin carefully folded, the glands in a separate bowl." It can filch a phrase here, an entire form there: a joke from Freud, an essay on "losing and being lost" by his daughter Anna, a dreamlike play-within-a-novel from "Ulysses." When it cannot make sense of Sophie's life, it can summon gods and men to its aid. "Gorgons, my sisters. Poseidon, where are you? Homer, Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Joyce, comfort me!" Sophie pleads.

The head is the ideal guide to a novel whose subject is severance in its many agonizing forms: familial, national, religious, and, above all, subjective. "Divorcing" is the story of a woman estranged from a sense of self that she never assented to, a self she seems to have accumulated passively. Leaving her marriage is one way of casting off this self and "coming into consciousness, a lifelong struggle," Sophie thinks. She recalls her hostile and baffling encounters with her parents, her love affairs, her degrading fights with her husband, and her anxious fussing over her children. All this seems to have led her to a turning point, a moment of self-definition. But how should a woman be after she has been severed from the social order? Cut off from the men who gave her a sense, however oppressive, of her place in the world?

At one of the funerals, the head rises to deliver a kind of answer to these questions: "Woman is part less than human, part more than human and part human." A woman must be an entity that is unformed and unfixed. She must unburden herself from the expectation that she will be consistent and knowable, like a character in a nineteenth-century realist novel. "I'm not hanging on to the old psychology, ego hang-up, continuity bit, the whole business of being a person, it's absurd," Sophie declares. Most of us simply accept the whole business of being a person and go about our lives. But that, Taubes suggests, is not living at all.

Days after the novel was published, Taubes walked into the sea at East Hampton and drowned herself. Inevitably, for readers, the novel's dead narrator and its dead author merged into an emblem of glamorous, doomed femininity. Recently, however, there has been a reappraisal of Taubes's work. In 2003, the Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research, in Berlin, established a Taubes archive, describing her life as a "story in which Jewish exile meets female intellectualism." From her papers, there emerged surprising discoveries: unpublished fiction; two volumes' worth of letters between her and her husband, Jacob Taubes, a scholar of religion; and enough notes and manuscripts to inspire two books, an intellectual biography by Christina Pareigis, and Elliot R. Wolfson's "The Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes" (Stanford), a study of the philosophical work that she produced alongside her fiction. In 2020, New York Review Books reissued "Divorcing" to appreciative reviews. Now they have released her far superior unpublished novella "Lament for Julia," along with nine short stories.

This flurry of activity seems to demand a reckoning on Taubes's behalf, and recent critics have declared her fiction a feminist triumph over the patrilineal line—over her father and her husband; over Freud and Heidegger; over the critic Hugh Kenner, who, hearing the echoes of James Joyce and Harold Robbins in "Divorcing," dismissed her in the *Times* as "a quick-change artist with the clothes of other writers." Here, one wants to insist, was a woman whose thoughts sprang from no one's head but her own. Here was a woman who, when faced with the scorn and the judgment of the patriarchs, laughed the laugh of the Medusa, and turned these stony-faced men into even stonier stones.

But this is too simple a revision. For Taubes, no woman could ever truly free herself from existing in some relation to men—of being, and of having been, begotten by them, flesh of their flesh, blood of their blood, their ideas and their history the starting point of her struggle. "I can't make a revolution," she wrote. "But we must at least plant the seeds."

Her name was not Susan Taubes, not at first. In 1928, she was born Judit Zsuzánna Feldmann, the daughter of Sándor Feldmann, a respected Freudian psychoanalyst, and the granddaughter of Mózes Feldmann, who had been the Grand Rabbi of Budapest. Biographers stress Taubes's sense of grievance toward her mother, the "pitiful and neurotic dragon" who had brought her into being only to abandon her for a new life with a new husband. "One could not become a 'hero' slaying her," Taubes commented. In 1939, the year the Hungarian government began to conscript Jewish men into its forced-labor service, Sándor Feldmann and his daughter immigrated to the United States.

In America, Judit Zsuzánna became Susan. She was a serious and brilliant student, first at Bryn Mawr, then at Harvard, where she received a doctorate in the history and philosophy of religion for her work on Simone Weil's quest for an absent God. When she was still an undergraduate, she met and married Jacob Taubes, who had been born to a Jewish family in Vienna. Their published correspondence—rapturous letters on art, exile, Judaism, and Heidegger which they exchanged from 1950 to 1952—reveals a shared desire to find a way to be at home in the world. "Heidegger says one very true and wise thing, that to attain authenticity of Being is not a matter of driving toward a certain goal," Susan wrote. It was a matter of staying in the same place, which was, for her, "literally the *home* the dimension where man and woman, Father, Mother, child, friend and friend, priest and participant, come home." In New York, where the couple settled, Susan Taubes joined an experimental-theatre troupe and edited volumes of Native American and African folktales. She had two children and taught religion at Columbia. She became a close friend of Susan Sontag, who, with her characteristic mixture of attraction and suspicion, referred to Taubes as her "double."

To an observer, Taubes would seem to have found her place. But her academic success, her marriage, her children—none of it reconciled her to the world. America remained a foreign country to her. Now Hungary was one, too. The bond of marriage, which Taubes described in "Divorcing" as a state of "sheer twoness that endured independent of moods, likes and dislikes," did not endure; she and Jacob separated in 1961, after many infidelities and cruelties. She drifted away from academia, but neither her criticism nor her fiction found an enthusiastic audience. "The homeland she could discover was in exile," Wolfson observes. "But in such a homeland, one finds one's place only by being displaced."

Her fictions are unhomely works, tales of bewildered, wild, and estranged women, who dwell, as Taubes imagined it, in "neither pure light nor pure darkness." Their ghostly voices flit between the material and spiritual realms. Years after Taubes's suicide, Sontag evoked her intellectual project in a short story, "Debriefing." The narrator's friend Julia spends her days cultivating love affairs and wondering. "Wondering?" the narrator asks, to which Julia replies:

> "Oh, I might start wondering about the relation of that leaf"—pointing to one—"to that one"—pointing to a neighbor leaf, also yellowing, its frayed tip almost perpendicular to the first one's spine. "Why are they lying there just like that? Why not some other way?"

"Crazy," the narrator thinks dismissively. For Sontag, Taubes functioned in part as a kind of cautionary tale, a parable of squandered brilliance. The tableau she creates of Julia is beautiful—the delicacy of the personified leaves, the contingency of their arrangement, the earnestness of Julia's wondering—yet ultimately parodic. The search for truth is always in danger of toppling into either pretension or madness.

But Sontag undersells the sophistication of Taubes's philosophy. The fiction courted neither insanity nor despair. Rather, it created a strain of dark antihumanist comedy that drew its humor from its insistence that reason and agency were illusions, and that "homelessness, insecurity and fear" were the grounds of authentic being. "Wonder myself why the comedy," Sophie's head remarks. It yearns for a world in which a person could cease to exist without leaving any trace of her existence: "Whisk one's self out of the world whole—dress, shoes, gloves, pure and all."

"Lament for Julia" was originally called "Confession of a Ghost," which Taubes proclaimed a less dignified, if funnier, title for a comic novel. Yet the difference between a confession and a lament is one not just of tone but of purpose. We confess in the hope of redemption; we lament knowing that redemption is impossible. All one can do is howl in sorrow and, when sorrow has been exhausted, laugh.

What has been lost in the novella is a wife and mother named Julia Klopps, the descendant of an haute-bourgeois family that has fallen into grotesque disrepair in what Taubes called "undefined, implied central European settings." Julia is the child of Father and Mother Klopps, cold and vaguely incestuous creatures who sit in a vast, moldering house while butlers, nurses, and maids scurry about. As a child, Julia is a daydreamer, absconding to the attic to fantasize about being kidnapped by gypsies and rescued by her dark prince, her true love. At fifteen, she is violently deflowered by Bruno, a soldier wider than he is high and baldish. At eighteen, she marries Peter Brody, a naval engineer with a small, graying head, a timid man raised by his spinster aunts. Between eighteen and twenty-nine, she has three children. At twenty-nine, she has an affair with a young architect named Paul Holle, her "one great passion." After they separate, she has her final child, whose paternity is uncertain. After turning thirty, she disappears.

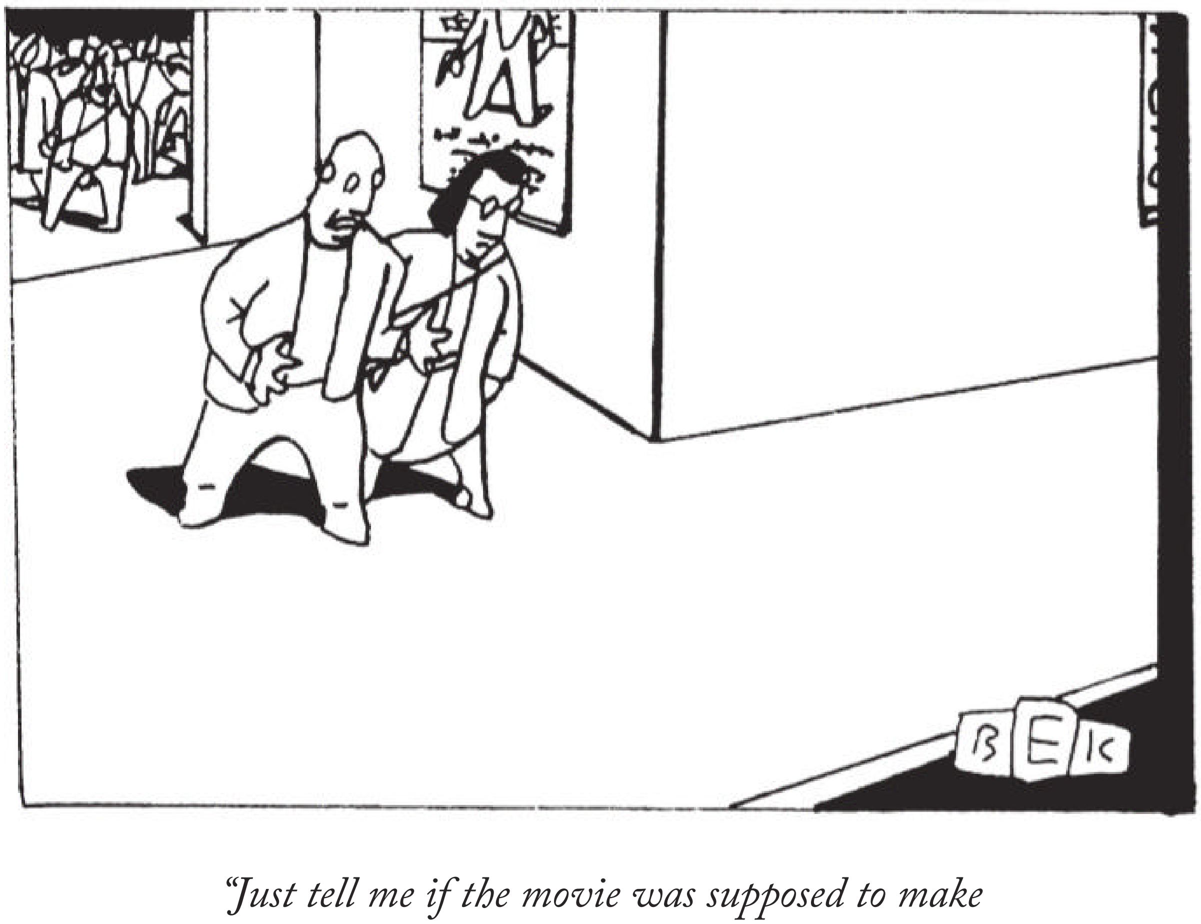
She is made to reappear by an unnamed voice that, mourning her disappearance, narrates glimpses of her life:

> She is gone. Julia has left me. For good now, I think. She went silently under the cover of night. It was the only way she could leave without being followed. I think of her going out into the night, going out like a candle, going down perhaps. I will never know where. I will never know how long ago. This used to be Julia's room. She left skirts hanging in the closet, the many skirts I bought her, flared, pleated and scalloped. I try them on one after another. . . . Her skirts subdue and appease me.

Who, or what, is the voice that speaks from under Julia's gorgeous skirts? It fancies itself an "actor," an "artist," a poor puppeteer. It is a "celestial spark," a "fallen angel," an "exalted consciousness," a brooding ghost. It is a whisper in the ear, warning Julia not to sin: "God is looking at you now, Julia." It is a parasite, "mysteriously grafted on Julia." It is convinced that it is real and that Julia, the fleshly creature, is a mere semblance, a series of costumes and masks—"a demure Julia, a seductive Julia, a maternal Julia"—that may be worn and discarded. The drama of the lament is as much about the uncertainty of the voice's identity and origins as it is about Julia's fate and folly.

What does the voice want? Above all, it desires order and propriety. It longs to transform its charge from the moody, chubby "Klopps girl" in a puffed-sleeve dress into "a lady, a dream, an apparition!" Sometimes it seems able to intervene in her life, or, at least, to convince itself that it has agency with regard to her actions: "My next ten years with Julia were spent mostly watching over her manners: keeping her from sticking out her belly, holding her head to one side, chewing her nails, sitting with her legs apart, laughing at the wrong time." In Julia's adolescence, the voice is mortified by her bloating flesh, by her monthly cycles and the leaking hole between her legs, where it would prefer to find a stiffening member. She cannot "even cast her own water from herself without wetting her bush," it complains. "But enough of the melancholy topic of the cunt. The missing member was enough to disconsole me, even apart from the nightmares I projected into Julia's concavity."

Classic penis envy, the voice admits, sneering at the psychology volumes that line the family's bookshelf. Its fixation on the phallus is a symptom of its own anxiety about its inability to live outside Julia's body. "Did I exist? Was I a thinking substance?," it wonders, not convinced, as Descartes was, that its ability to ask the question answers it. It is enlightened enough to know that no higher power has au-



"Just tell me if the movie was supposed to make sense or not supposed to make sense."

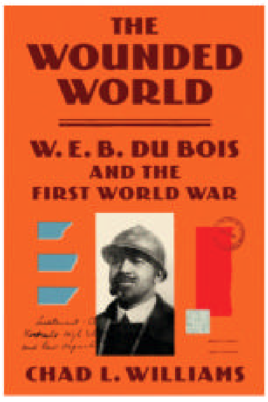
thorized its existence: "If it had only pleased God to seal my appointment, everything would have turned out differently." It has read widely in philosophy and the history of religion but still cannot find a reason for its being. Its learned voice slips from solipsism to contempt, prurience to prudery; from inside Julia's limbs to outside her body, as she indulges her "stupid, harmless vices, window shopping, bubble baths, waiting for her true love to appear, paging through endless stacks of fashion magazines."

"Lament for Julia" devises a feminist metaphysics, or, as the voice puts it with comic incredulity, a portrait of "the elements of being in a skirt!" The voice is the spirit of old European civilization—from Augustine to Freud—battling the flesh of a young woman. It is what Taubes, in her correspondence, called the "not-I," as distinct from the "I" that one uses to fix one's identity in speech and in writing. It is the superego personified, made monstrous, obscene, sadistic, and abject. It is the voice of the cunt—described by Taubes elsewhere as "a nothing, a *negativum*"—at the center of existence.

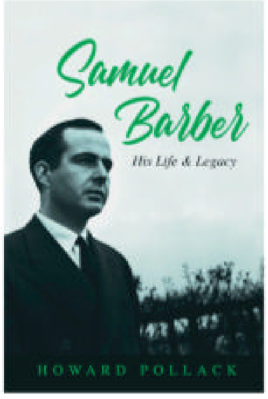
The voice can be silenced only by Julia's surrender to conformity, the straitjacketing of her desire by a Christian sense of shame and law-giving. "The holy family!," it proclaims after Julia marries Peter, apparently sealing her bourgeois fate. Together, Julia and the voice "become transfigured," it says. "Pure, remote, angelic, I basked in the morning sunlight that fell upon Julia's hand serving coffee, or brushing her daughter's hair." The lament testifies to everything that women repress—desire, disappointment, rage—in order to be consecrated as women before the presence of God the Father and Peter, the Biblical patriarch, the rock on which the Church and its orthodoxies were built. "I codified the past, set down the canon for good, a final version," the voice announces.

The voice inhabits many roles, but, in the end, it is Julia herself, a paradoxically singular and divided creature. As such, the voice cannot abide by its own doctrines; Julia's body will betray it and her husband both. Her affair with Paul Holle begins after he sees her on a park bench. They meet in shops and in gardens, at

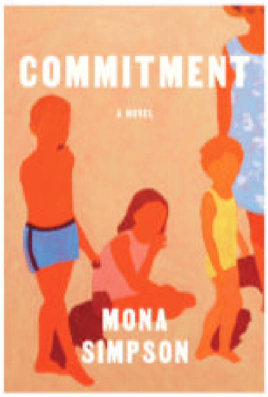
BRIEFLY NOTED



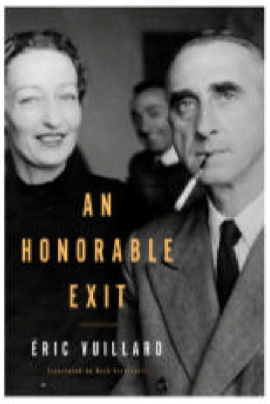
The Wounded World, *by Chad L. Williams (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This literary history traces the genesis of W. E. B. Du Bois's ambitious, unfinished study of the role of Black soldiers in the First World War. Du Bois had called on African Americans to "close ranks" ("*first* your Country, *then* your Rights!"), but his postwar research revealed to him the conflict's horrors—Black troops denied crucial equipment; Black officers convicted in sham trials—leading him to question the merits of the war and the point of Black soldiers' sacrifice. Du Bois meticulously documented "a devastating catalog of systemic racial injustice," Williams writes, while showing "an ability to distill it into concise, lively, accessible prose." The same goes for this book, which weaves a propulsive narrative from a tangle of facts and forces.



Samuel Barber, *by Howard Pollack (Illinois)*. Barber's music continues to be treasured for its melding of flawless craftsmanship and deep feeling. Barber himself was more complicated, as this fine biography reveals. Born on Philadelphia's Main Line in 1910, he was an ebullient gay uncle to his extended family, and counted Andy Warhol and Jacqueline Kennedy among his friends. But his personality was tinged with nastiness and melancholia, intensified by alcoholism and by the collapse of his relationship with the composer Gian Carlo Menotti. Pollack's account of the psychosexual intrigue that engulfed many of the guests at the couple's Westchester home is startling in its frankness.



Commitment, *by Mona Simpson (Knopf)*. Set in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, this novel follows the Aziz siblings—Walter, Lina, and Donnie—after their mother's commitment to a mental-health institution. "The sadness was always there, an underground cascade," Lina observes of her mother, whose condition becomes a reflecting pool around which the siblings gather, peering into themselves, and into her. Simpson darts between their points of view, detailing the vicissitudes of their lives. The novel's strength lies less in dramatic conflict than in small details, which continually highlight questions of care. Lina speaks about "medieval olfactory therapy with flowers" and about the Belgian town of Geel, where patients are integrated into the community—as her mother never was.



An Honorable Exit, *by Éric Vuillard, translated from the French by Mark Polizzotti (Other Press)*. Vuillard, who specializes in novels tracking historical events, turns his eye to France's attempts to extricate itself from the First Indochina War, culminating in the disastrous defeat at Dien Bien Phu, in 1954. Vuillard examines not only the battlefield but also company boardrooms and National Assembly watering holes, to capture "how easy it was to be pragmatic and realistic thousands of kilometers away, to draw up a balance sheet and make projections, when you were in no personal danger." With measured outrage and penetrating irony, he pillories the alternating bluster and euphemism of French decision-makers while emphasizing colonialism's brutal toll on the Vietnamese.

the hairdresser and in the bookstore. They drive in the country and have sex in his shabby room while the spinster aunts mind the lonely, perplexed children. The great accomplishment of "Lament for Julia" is how imperceptibly it draws the fine filaments of sympathy between the voice and Julia—the anguished control with which consciousness is harnessed to flesh. Soon, the voice cannot tell what influence it has, or could ever have again, over Julia's will:

> Was there a decision to be made, when she lay naked between another man's sheets? . . . Had Julia made her decision? She sat by the window with opiate eyes. Like some sea plant incapable of volition, yet responsive to every ripple; a fish brushing against its fine hairs would cause its cup to dilate and shut. He came up behind her and laid his hand on her throat. Her mouth went after it, lay open on his hand. Was that a decision?

Under the reign of Eros, spirit and flesh come to coexist in an involuntary state of being, "incapable of volition, yet responsive to every ripple." Julia's transgressions bring the voice to consciousness, to life; in turn, the voice gives Julia's life a sense of purpose. It has a reason to speak, to exist: she has a story to tell, even if it is an "old melodrama," headlined by "a woman past thirty waiting to be saved, ready at the glimmer of a hope to fall from the dignity of marriage and motherhood." Yet the growing intimacy of Julia and the voice comes at a terrible price: the crackup of the Julia of the holy family into many Julias who cannot be reconciled. There is the Julia who feels safe with Peter, and the Julia who feels alive with Paul. There is the Julia who resigns herself to the life she has made, and the Julia who hopes to disappear from it. (Paul, knowing that Julia is incapable of making a decision, realizes that he must be the one to leave.)

At the end of the affair, where has Julia gone? Physically, she is still present, dressing the children, or bringing in the milk, or sitting in the shed at night alone, drinking gin and playing solitaire. But, as the novella draws to a close, it is clear that she and the voice are undergoing a mutually assured destruction. The voice's rebukes are murdering her desire, and the murder of her desire is silencing the voice. Confronted with the docile Julia, the uncomplaining Julia, the gin-numbed Julia, the voice will find that it has no reason left to speak.

In the archives of the Radcliffe Institute, at Harvard, there is a recording, from 1966, of Taubes reading from "Lament for Julia." The voices of the dead are often seductive, but hers is especially mesmerizing. When she begins to read, it is in a fragile murmur that is precise, calm, and almost clinically detached. When she breaks off and leaps ahead to a later passage—to the "many Julias, one to be a whore, one to marry in white, another, no, at least a dozen little Julias to be raped in turn"—the murmur turns insistent and agitated, stumbling on its own words. When she stops reading and explains the novel in asides to the audience, it is with small sighs of apology, hesitation, and embarrassment. "I wrote it while I was teaching comparative mythology and history of religion, which I fear shows," she says. "I realized perhaps too late in the book that it's really a comic novel, and, had I known that earlier, probably I would have written a less mournful work."

Listening to the strange rhythms of Taubes's delivery, one realizes how much is lost when the abstracted voice of the lament becomes a real voice emanating from an actual human body. The novella's success hangs on the voice remaining dislocated: "In the dark I try to remember Julia." It must be capable of existing everywhere and nowhere, of moving into and out of Julia's body without her consent or even her knowledge. Julia's "sole right to exist was through my strict, fastidious, incarnal presence," the voice insists. Conversely, its existence is premised on Julia's unreality—the absence of her words, the immateriality of her body.

By the time of the reading, Taubes had approached several publishers about "Lament for Julia," including Jérôme Lindon, at Les Éditions des Minuit, in Paris. One of Lindon's authors, Samuel Beckett, wrote in support, pronouncing Taubes "an authentic talent." He described "Lament for Julia" as the "study of a 'pendue,' tension between 'I' and 'she,' search of identity. . . . . Pronounced erotic touches, very effective rawness of language." The "pendue" likely refers to the hanged man of the tarot deck, suspended upside down on a tree whose branches reach up to heaven and whose roots grow down to hell. What appealed to Taubes and Beckett about the pendue was the involuntary nature of her body's reactions—what Beckett called "the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of the grit in the wind." As a genre, the lament is, after all, adjacent to the spontaneous sighs and shapeless screams of mourners. It carries the purity of their suffering.

Taubes, near the end of her reading at the Radcliffe Institute, acknowledged Beckett's influence. "I was sort of thinking, Well, if you do have problems like Samuel Beckett, and, at the same time, you're a woman, how can you write Madame Unnamable?" she told her audience. This may have been what she set out to do in "Lament for Julia," but she ended up doing one better, creating a female precursor of the male voice in "Company," a novella that Beckett composed nearly a decade after Taubes's death. In it, a voice addresses a man in the dark, speaking about a mother, a father, and a lover—glimpses of a past life that are attached ever so tenuously to the prostrate body of the present. The voice Beckett devised is a sparser, gentler, and more constant presence than Taubes's raging and changeable spirit. But it brokers the same relationship, between the comedy of the unprotected, reactive body and the pathos of the self-conscious voice. "I. We. She. No, I give up," Taubes ends her lament. Beckett begins his, "Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third the cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not."

Between Beckett and Taubes range all the voices in which literature can speak: first, second, and third person, singular and plural, each estranged from the world but still in touch with its elemental matter. In their dark, there is no man who boasts of his creation. No woman raises a head in triumph. But, if we pay attention, we hear something else, part more human, part less—a faint sob of laughter. Listen. It keeps itself company. ♦

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BOOKS

UNCANNY VALLEY

Mannequins and mystification in Dorothy Tse’s dreamlike Hong Kong.

BY KATY WALDMAN

Opposites converge and hierarchies are upended in Tse’s début novel.

“The professor had his arms around Aliss’s waist, and imagined himself a prince from a fairy tale.” Already, the reader is peeking anxiously through her fingers. *Abort! Abort!* Literature is littered with the bodies of would-be lovers who gallop off the edge of reality. Don Quixote, the ur-fantasist, “spent his nights reading from dusk till dawn and his days reading from sunrise to sunset,” until “his brains dried up, causing him to lose his mind.” Two centuries later, Emma Bovary died of overexposure to romances, having fancied herself “the beloved of every novel, the heroine of every drama, the vague *she* of every volume of poetry.” And now, in “Owlish,” a new work of fiction by Dorothy Tse, a lonely middle-aged professor named Q falls in love with Aliss, a life-size mechanical ballerina. He forgets that his princess is just a toy and that he is just a “hack teacher.” In thrall to an inanimate object, he feels freer than he ever has.

Tse, who lives in Hong Kong and writes in Chinese, is an accomplished author of short fiction. “Owlish,” her début novel, has been translated into a playful and sinuous English by Natascha Bruce. The book, which took shape during the city’s pro-democracy protests in 2019 and 2020, features two thinly veiled Hong Kongs. They lie on top of each other, and both go by the name Nevers. Great Britain is Valeria; the authoritarian Vanguard Republic, which rules over inland Ksana, stands in for the People’s Republic of China. In the first Nevers, Q, a scholar of Valerian, writes research proposals, applies for superfluous funding, and tends to routine paperwork. He and his wife, Maria, a government bureaucrat, own an apartment in an “orderly and narrow” neighborhood, where all construction is “meticulously calculated.”

The first Nevers is a place of hierarchy and compression, of breakneck development and brutal yet submerged competition for status. Blue-eyed foreigners patronize the fine-dining establishments left over from colonial days, and second-generation Ksanese immigrants look down on newer arrivals. Pinched storefronts and dark, mazy alleys abut a vision of urban modernity, all skyscrapers and glass. With his respectable post, his becoming spouse, and his “flat most people couldn’t even dream of being able to afford,” Q has carved out a foothold in the city’s vertiginous slope. But it is a precarious one. Untenured at fifty, he seems to lack his own profession’s codes of advancement. He comes from somewhere else—the couple’s friends wonder where, noting that his complexion almost appears to shift with the light—and there are hints of harrowing run-ins with military police. Q, who has a “pounding heart rate” and “sorrowful creases in his forehead,” is a man under pressure; he is tentative, resentful, ready to explode.

The second Nevers is a shadow zone, a dream world behind or beneath the first. “Dangerous” but “full of unknown potential,” it hosts Q’s fecund—and unabashedly filthy—fantasy life. Tse’s prose curls around Q like a vine, dropping him in landscapes that are equal parts Bosch and Freud, lush and deranged. Imagine an after-hours cut of Disney’s “Fantasia”; Alexander Portnoy on acid; a Losing Your Virginity theme park brought to you by Mephistopheles. Here the professor crosses a waterfall that sounds like a woman crying out in pleasure, encounters “a livid red nipple” the size of a wide-screen TV, and ogles preposterous foliage: “A magenta banana flower protruded from a cluster

ILLUSTRATION BY WOSHIBAI

of bananas, the blossom pendulous and plump, like a cheerful penis." Tse gives exaggerated form to Q's fears as well as to his frustrated urges. In the second Nevers, mechanical tigers gnaw on the viscera of mechanical soldiers, and "men with guns at their waists" snarl "with their big, gaping mouths."

At the beginning of "Owlish," Q hides a collection of female dolls in a secret cabinet in his study. He brings them out only while Maria is at work; otherwise he keeps his fantasies safely locked away. Once Q acquires Aliss, that changes. He installs her in an abandoned church, which he visits for hours on end, brushing her hair, arranging her limbs, and draping her in the latest fashions. She is his co-star in the "folk tale full of lust and passion" playing out in his head. (Rocinante makes a cameo as a "snow-white rocking horse with a flowing golden mane," which the sweethearts bestride in the nude.) With the encouragement of a mysterious friend named Owlish, Q recites poetry to Aliss and expounds on "great philosophical and academic debates, seeking to express his views on love, time, consciousness, desire, existence, and as yet unnamed new fields of thought." Tse describes Aliss with characteristic slyness: "Her pouting rosebud lips were always so contented," and "her glimmering eyes, their colour shifting like the sea, communicated to him the message: *Yes, I get it. I completely understand.*" As the book continues, Q's sleeping and waking hours blur, and Tse's writing grows increasingly surreal. When Aliss comes to life (or the professor dreams that she does), her awakening has the rustle of inevitability.

Meanwhile, demonstrations are spreading across the city. Activists in Nevers protest the "groundless disqualification of an election candidate" and the modifying of history textbooks. One student even climbs a clock tower. But Q is insensible to the angry signs on the cafeteria walls and the bulletin boards outside the library. He hardly notices when just three students show up to his hundred-person lecture course. "The world around him," Tse writes, "seemed to vanish into his blind spot."

Q is not the only resident of Nevers whose sight is compromised:

> Every year, the smog grew thicker. You could tell by simply extending a hand, with no need for any official government report, but this was an age in which you couldn't trust what was right in front of you. Newspapers and televisions maintained there was no smog in Nevers, or else that there had always been smog in Nevers, and that these were two sides of the same truth. And no matter which side a person chose to believe, the important thing was that the pollution could not possibly have blown in from inland Ksana.

The smog in Nevers engulfs the skyscrapers and the hand in front of one's face—and perhaps also the student protests, which never appear in the news.

Within the mist and the government mystification around the mist hangs a question: Is "Owlish," which riffs on the perennial theme of runaway imagination, also a political allegory? For years, Q's life has felt curiously faint and dreamlike. Strange lacunae interrupt his memories, most jarringly when Q interacts with university officials or law enforcement. It is as though the book, with its ellipses and obstructed messages, were depicting the reality-warping effects of an uncanny, constraining force—a force like state censorship. The half-encrypted aspect of Tse's place-names, as if she had hastily crossed out "Hong Kong" and written in "Nevers," adds to an aura of dissident literature, of samizdat.

Amid all this, Q rebels by doubling down on fantasy. Aliss, he believes, has liberated his desires, imagination, and intellect. He grows his hair out and stops spending time at the university. He treats Aliss like a status symbol, whisking her onto helicopters and the balconies of luxury hotels. He hires a chauffeur to ferry the two of them around town in a minivan with tinted windows. "To hell with his university superiors!" he thinks. "To hell with his wife and her old, lowbrow friends! Fuck them all!"

But how free is he, really? Like Emma Bovary, he has escaped the prison of repression only to fall victim to his own mind. In his head, he is unbounded, a mythical figure, but from the outside Q resembles a "discarded toy," full of "rusted gears" and "blocked-up pipes." His dream woman, stranded between the organic and the mechanical, reflects his incomplete humanity—how he struggles to distinguish between freedom and ownership, how he can no longer conceive of what it would mean to be real.

Yet "Owlish" is not only a story about Professor Q. As the plot progresses, Tse turns her attention to Maria and, especially, to Aliss. Some chapters unfold from Aliss's perspective, inviting us to identify with her. The doll wonders about her own nature: "She touched her cheek. . . . Soft and not ice-cold, but not exactly warm either." After finding a copy of the "Kama Sutra," she quickly outstrips Q in the art of lovemaking—the student has become the master. She also falls into fellowship with the pro-democracy activists. (In Tse's hands, this convergence is sensuous and romantic, a "warm current" passing through hard flesh.) When their van steers into a protest march, Q pounds on the partition and shouts at the driver to flee. Aliss, more receptive to the flowing, nocturnal lessons of the second Nevers, likens the protesters to "black water droplets . . . leading to another secret, expectant city, waiting to bloom wide open like a flower."

This political and civic unfurling parallels Aliss's own awakening. Tse's interest in machines becoming people brings her back to the circumstances that turn people into machines. At the novel's outset, state censorship, economic precariousness, and class stratification have transformed Q into a "flesh-and-blood mannequin." He rebels, but in a limited way, shrinking back from his students and refusing solidarity with their protest movement. His vision of freedom remains private and acquisitive, whereas Tse suggests that real freedom—political, imaginative, and erotic—does not subjugate others; real freedom is democratic, a public and collective project. Aliss comes to embody this ideal, and with it the most hopeful and the most human parts of Q. "She looked nothing like a doll," he thinks, as their tryst draws to a close. "She was him"—pulled up from the depths of the looking glass, less a mistress than a twin. But, by the time Q realizes that he and Aliss are doubles, it's too late. He will never see himself again. ♦

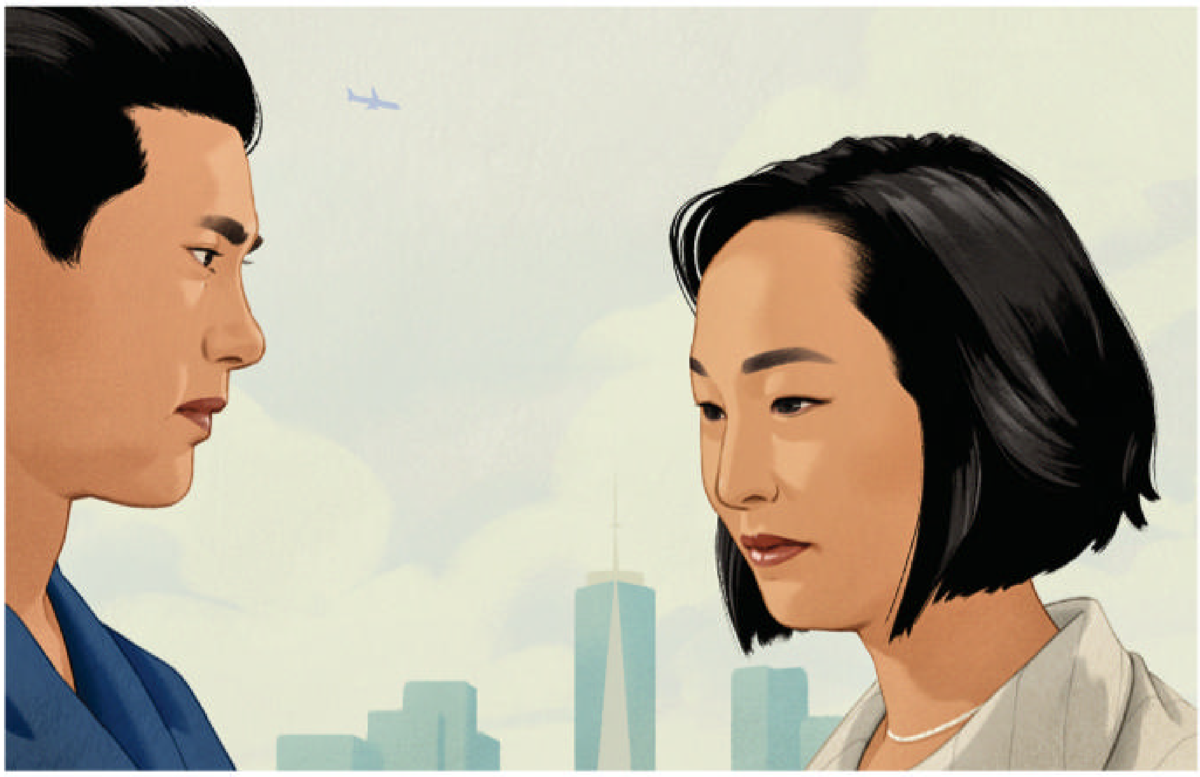
THE CURRENT CINEMA

PLAYTIME

"Past Lives" and "Squaring the Circle."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Back and forth we go, through time, in Celine Song's début film, "Past Lives," and there's not a DeLorean in sight. After a brief opening scene, in a New York bar, the words "24 years earlier" appear onscreen. For a second, I misread "years" as "hours"—a more manageable flashback—but no, Song really is grabbing us by the hand and asking us to leap before we look.



Teo Yoo and Greta Lee star in Celine Song's début feature.

The first leap takes us to Seoul, where Na Young (Seung-ah Moon), aged twelve, lives with her parents and her sister. She walks home from school with a boy, Hae Sung (Seung-min Yim), who, for once, has got better grades than she has. She could not be more annoyed. He calls her a psycho, as if that were a quality to be admired. The two of them go on a playdate, climbing on chunky sculptures in a park, their faces vanishing and coming back into view—a hint of the transience that will lend the film an air of cheerfully worried fragility.

The exciting news for Na Young is that she and her family are relocating, to Canada. As if that were not transformative enough, she acquires an English name, Nora Moon, which sounds like the heroine of a fairy tale. Hae Sung is upset by her departure, but, hey, he's a kid; he'll get over it. He does not. (The whole movie is alive to the idea of our *not* getting over things. Think of it as a welcome rebuke to our nagging demands for closure.) Twelve years later, as an adult (Teo Yoo), Hae Sung reaches out to Nora (Greta Lee), now an aspiring playwright in New York. True to the mechanisms of modern love, they connect on Facebook. In lieu of billets-doux sealed with wax, we get buffering, frozen laptop screens, and texts that arrive at three o'clock in the morning.

Some things, though, never go out of style. Notice Nora's response to making contact with her old pal: filmed on the street, from overhead, she walks along with a spring—or a springtime—in her step, as if barely able to stop herself from breaking into a dance. It's a lovely old-school touch, all the more unexpected because the grownup Nora is the most composed of souls. Hae Sung recalls that, as a child, she used to weep a lot. "You can't cry in New York City?" he asks. "When I first immigrated, I used to cry a lot," Nora replies, "but then I realized that nobody cared." You sense a sharp turn in Lee's performance: she is seldom less than charming, but there are increasing flickers of severity, too—the implication being that charm alone will not fuel you for city life. You have to be hard. Hence the abruptness with which Nora, in a video call, tells Hae Sung, "I want us to stop talking for a while."

Another dozen years flit by. Nora, living in the East Village, is married to Arthur (John Magaro), a writer whom she met at a creative retreat in Montauk. The existence of Hae Sung, on the other hand, has stalled. Now an engineer, he still goes out drinking in Seoul with his buddies, and he's meant to be getting married, but, as he says, "I'm too ordinary." The one extraordinary thing about him is the strength of his feelings for Nora, which refuse to subside. He flies to New York, checks into a hotel room (a Whistlerian study in blue-gray), and then stands in a park, awaiting Nora, nervously smoothing his hair and his clothes, as if he were twelve years old again and preparing to receive a prize. When Nora calls his name, the camera stays on him, gauging the swell of emotion on his face—a kind of grateful astonishment, tranquil with ecstasy.

Here, at last, you get swept up in the action. If such moments are rare, the rarity is not exactly a fault. Suffice to say that Song's film is a romance—perhaps *the* romance—of the now. Compared with Max Ophüls's "Letter from an Unknown Woman" (1948), which is no less reliant on chronological hops, and which slays me with every viewing, "Past Lives" is strikingly cautious, calm, and superfine. A cynic might even suggest that, like its title, it flirts with the timid, fighting shy of excess in its characters as in its compositions. (Try counting all the shots with mirrors and windows. In every respect, Song is inviting reflection.) The only scenes that ring false, tellingly, are the male boozing bouts in Seoul. Vulgarity is not on the menu. If there is comedy here, it's light and consciously awkward; villainy is unimaginable; sex is scarcely mentioned, let alone performed. When Nora and Arthur wake up in bed, she admits that her strongest desire is for chicken wings.

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONARDO SANTAMARIA

Yet the film hits home. In part, that is a tribute to its melancholy. Unlike the nocturnal strollers in Woody Allen's "Manhattan" (1979), who leaned into love while seated on a bench, beside a gorgeously envisioned Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, Hae Sung and Nora stand stiffly in front of the Brooklyn Bridge, in daylight, while *another* couple, behind them, are enfolded in a kiss. In short, Song's film may not be a love story at all. I suspect that its real theme is transplantation, of which love is both a casualty and a blessing. Look at Arthur, sweetly attempting to learn Korean, and fretting because Nora, when she dreams, speaks Korean in her sleep. Listen to her, meanwhile, on the subject of Hae Sung: "He's so Korean. I feel so not Korean when I'm with him." Rich in settling and unsettling, "Past Lives," for all its coolness, provokes us with difficult questions. When a person is described as Korean American—or French Moroccan, or whatever—what depths of experience are embodied in that juxtaposition? Is it surprising that Greco-Roman wrestlers tie themselves in knots? Is Hae Sung being cruel, or honest, when he refers to Nora as "someone who leaves"? No wonder the whole thing ends in tears.

If you happened to be driving down the Sunset Strip in 1970, you might have seen a cow. Not a live cow, or portions of a dead one on a barbecue, but a billboard that featured a placid beast, in a green field, turning to face the camera. The image was there to advertise a new Pink Floyd album, "Atom Heart Mother," whose cover bore no mention of the band. No words at all, in fact. Nothing but the cow—who is not to be confused, obviously, with the cow who appeared on a Pink Floyd bootleg in the nineteen-eighties titled "Dark Side of the Moo."

The cover of "Atom Heart Mother" was dreamed up by Hipgnosis, the design company that you instinctively sought out, from the late sixties to the late seventies, if you were a big and smelly cheese in the world of British rock. The saga of the business, which was formed and defined by two men, Storm Thorgerson and Aubrey (Po) Powell, is told in a new documentary, "Squaring the Circle (The Story of Hipgnosis)." This is your chance to learn about the naked blond children clambering over rocks on the front of Led Zeppelin's "Houses of the Holy"; the delicate drawing of filmmaker paraphernalia on 10cc's "The Original Soundtrack"; and, for Peter Gabriel's first solo album, the droplets of rain on the hood of a car, each of which was minutely scratched on the print to intensify its gleam. Oddly, Gabriel's shiny alien stare on the inner sleeve was *not* a graphic effect; he wore silver contact lenses. Of course he did.

Why do such arcana matter, and how come "Squaring the Circle" is so bracing to behold? It's directed by Anton Corbijn, whose film "Control" (2007)—a dramatized account of the life of Ian Curtis, the lead singer of Joy Division—is the least fanciful and the most grimly vehement of musical bio-pics. Corbijn has an obsessive eye, and it suits the detail-crazy methods of Powell and Thorgerson. (The latter was famously cussed; according to Nick Mason, Pink Floyd's drummer, he "wouldn't take yes for an answer.") To meet the demands of Paul McCartney, for example, Hipgnosis thought nothing of ferrying a statue to the snowy peak of a mountain, by helicopter, for the cover of "Wings Greatest." And if you were one of the spaced-out fans who spent hours puzzling over the front of Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here," trying to work out whether the guy on fire, in a suit, was truly *on fire*, the new movie, far from pouring cold water on rock mythology, is here to fan the flames.

"Squaring the Circle" is thus a double elegy. On the A-side, it conjures up a lost world of noisome glamour, in which visitors to the toilet-less headquarters of Hipgnosis, in London's Soho, were forced to pee in the sink. (This could explain why the company was never commissioned by, say, Diana Ross & the Supremes.) On the B-side lies a more specific loss. The album cover was a minor but deliriously popular art form that was limited not just by shape—a neat fit, incidentally, for the square format favored by many modish photographers of the sixties—but also by the prospect of its own inevitable death. Technology gave, and technology hath taken away. Dismal though it was to see the cover of Genesis's "The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway," into which Hipgnosis had packed an entire narrative, shrunk to a flimsy insert inside the case of a compact disk, how much sadder it is to summon the LP on Spotify these days and to find your iPhone displaying something smaller than a graham cracker. Vinyl has made a comeback, of sorts, but who still wants to be Hipgnotized? ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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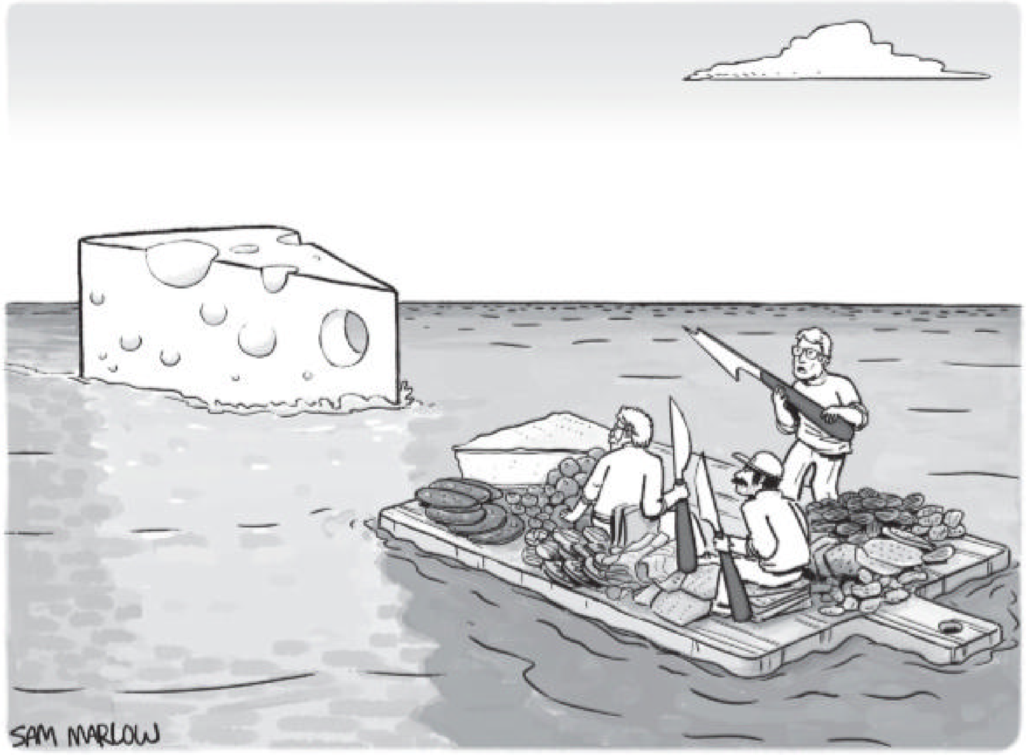
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Sam Marlow, must be received by Sunday, June 11th. The finalists in the May 29th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 26th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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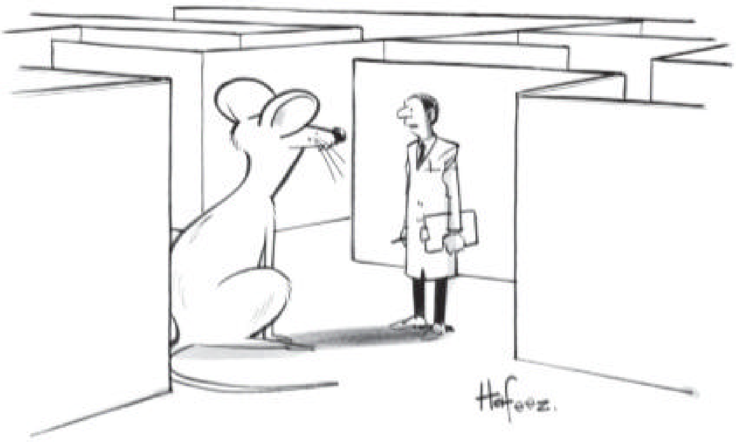
THE FINALISTS

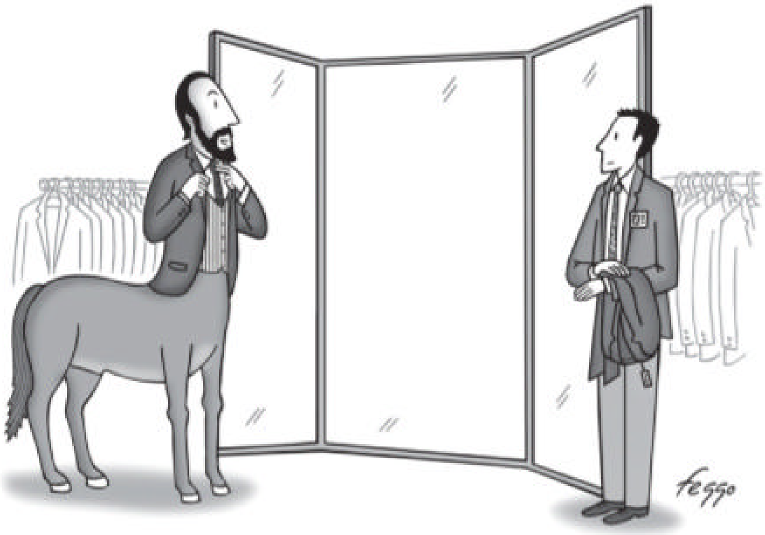


“It's an honor to work with a giant in the field.”
Nicole Chrolavicius, Burlington, Ont.

“Actually, the toughest thing was finding a tiny clipboard.”
Jon Ketzner, Cumberland, Md.

“You've outgrown the lab, so we've assigned you a cubicle.”
Elizabeth Ann Stein, Houston, Texas

THE WINNING CAPTION

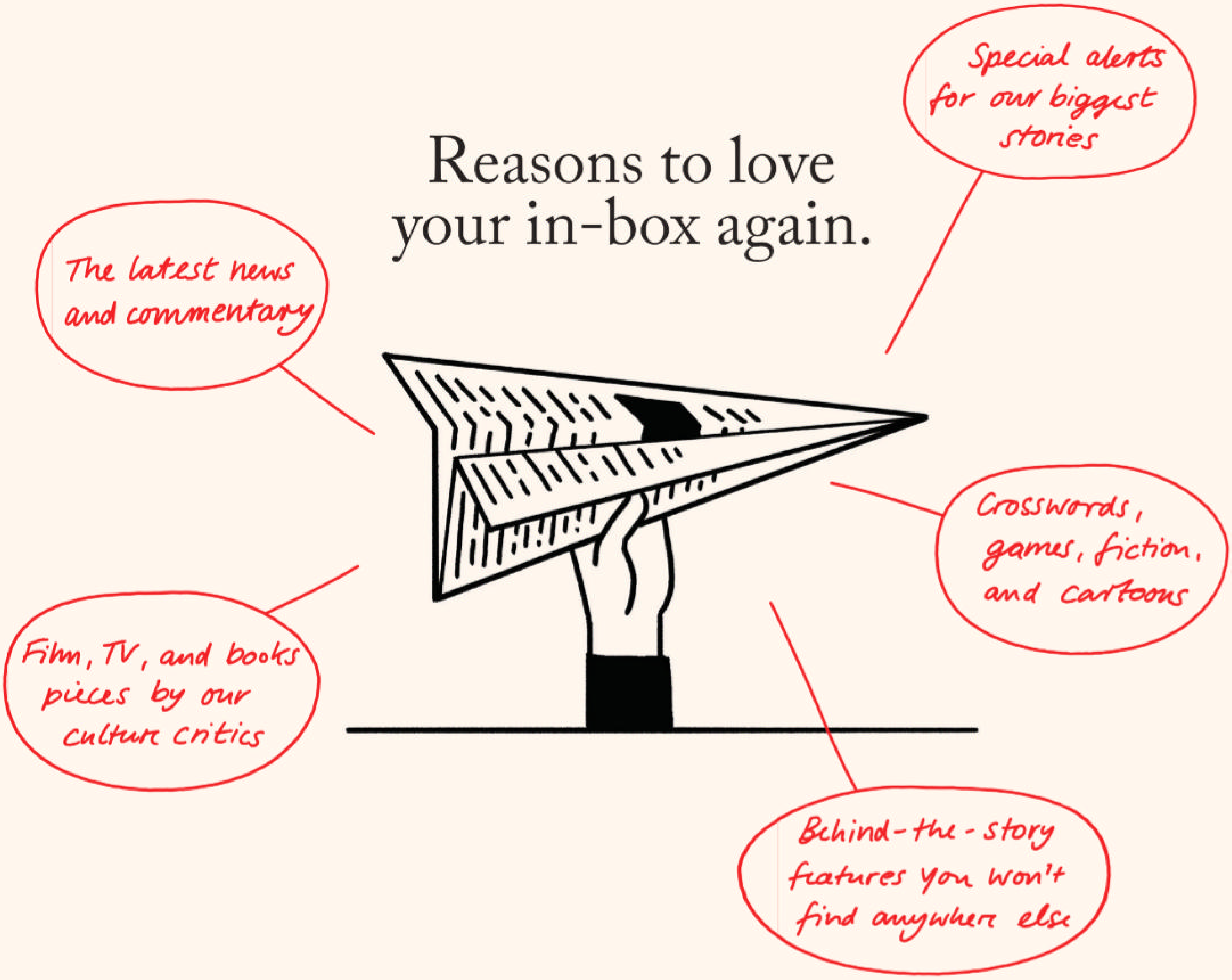


“I'll take the jacket and the pants and the pants.”
Yael Nobel, New York City

THE NEW YORKER

The Daily

Reasons to love your in-box again.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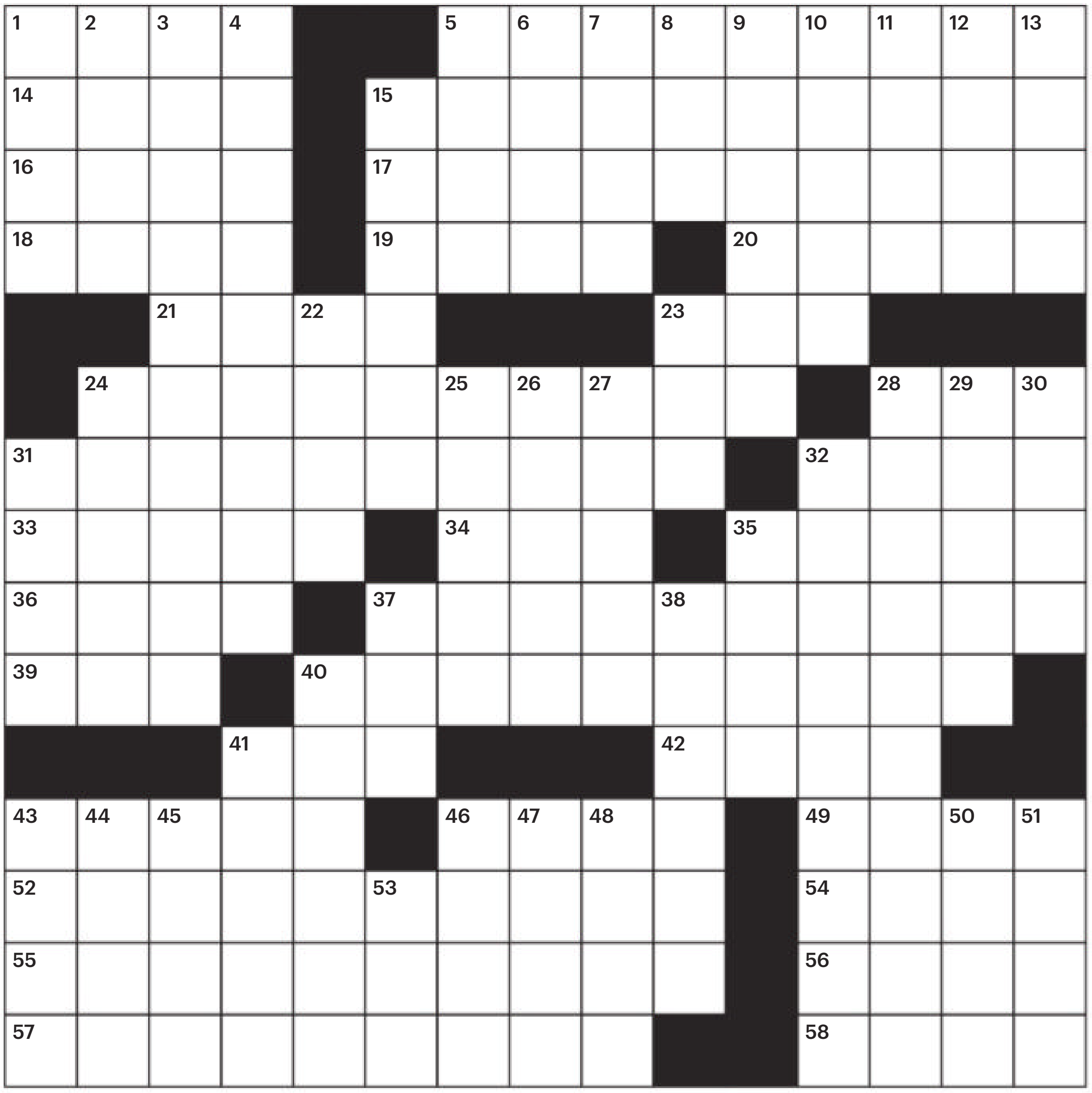
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB



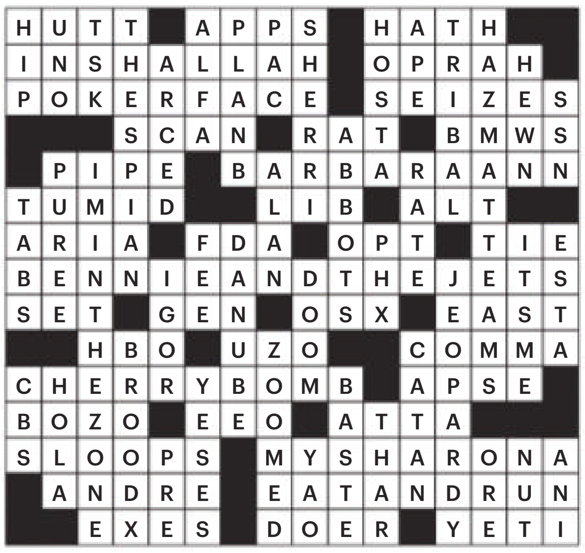
ACROSS

1 Leave out
5 Parking spots at a pub?
14 Update, as a kitchen
15 "Hotel ___" (Eagles song about a place where "you can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave")
16 Far from frazzled
17 Embarrassing discovery at the Louvre, say
18 Some beer-garden offerings
19 Three-___ (back-to-back-to-back championships)
20 Makes more bearable
21 Stare, as into a crystal ball
23 "Some aquatic mammals at the zoo escaped. It was otter chaos!," for example
24 Electrical device that might get mistaken for a surge protector
28 Media company based in London
31 Flitting between numerous tasks
32 Nation south of Ecuador
33 Adams who photographed Yosemite
34 ___ Maria (brand of coffee liqueur)
35 Flower at the center of a seventeenth-century Dutch market crash
36 Verb in many sauce recipes
37 Reference book for geography buffs and armchair explorers
39 Mind reader's purported gift, briefly
40 Garment from an older sibling, perhaps
41 Penguin suit
42 Lion's locks
43 The Apple apple, the Shell shell, and the Domino's domino
46 The Seas with ___ & Friends (Epcot attraction based on a Pixar film)
49 Code used by Webmasters
52 "That went over my head"
54 Where many Browns, Blue Jackets, and Reds fans live
55 Residence that, despite its name, doesn't typically move after it's been delivered
56 Jay who hosted the "Tonight Show"
57 Travel-booking site whose ads feature Kaley Cuoco
58 Sound from a leaky faucet

DOWN

1 Black-and-white ocean predator
2 Happy ___ (McDonald's menu item)
3 Fodder for water-cooler chitchat
4 Friend of Huckleberry Finn
5 Reveal, as claws
6 Ski resort near Salt Lake City
7 Africa's Great ___ Valley (long series of trenches caused by tectonic activity)
8 Bay Area airport code
9 Ripped into pieces
10 Instrument that may have several thousand pipes
11 Bills featuring George Washington
12 Italian coins replaced by the euro
13 "Survey ___ . . ." ("Family Feud" catchphrase)
15 Briny bagel-and-lox toppers
22 Great enthusiasm
23 Dessert that, aptly, has a typical circumference-to-diameter ratio of approximately 3.14
24 Plays often called on fourth down
25 Didn't disclose, as key information
26 Leather-jacket-wearing greaser in the movie "Grease"
27 Royal domain
28 Predictor or indicator of change
29 "Scarface" director De Palma
30 Beer-pong containers
31 Opposite of an acid
32 Subjected to tinny Muzak, maybe
35 "Look what I did!"
37 Material used to create the figures at Madame Tussauds
38 Assign to a lesser rank
40 "American ___" (2013 film starring Amy Adams and Christian Bale as scammers)
41 Common mixer with gin
43 Like a wet noodle
44 Stench
45 Large Asian desert
46 Classic soft drink whose name sounds like a calf-covering sock
47 Boarding school attended by Princes William and Harry
48 Street performer who never says "thank you" to tippers?
50 Lead-in to skirt or van
51 Word in a shoelace-tying tutorial
53 Aid for styling a pompadour

Solution to the previous puzzle:



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P	O	K	E	R	F	A	C	E	■	S	E	I	Z	E	S
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8

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More graceful than ever before, the Third Generation of the De Ville Prestige has been introduced with all the emblematic DNA you'd expect, but with a comprehensive upgrade across the design. This new 34 mm Co-Axial Master Chronometer model in stainless steel is presented on a shimmering bright blue leather strap. The PVD lavender dial features an exclusive 2-in-1 finish, combining a random vertical pattern with radiant sun-brushing, while the display includes a circular date window and dotted minute track.

Ω
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